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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

JULY

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Pamela Sargent
Stephen King
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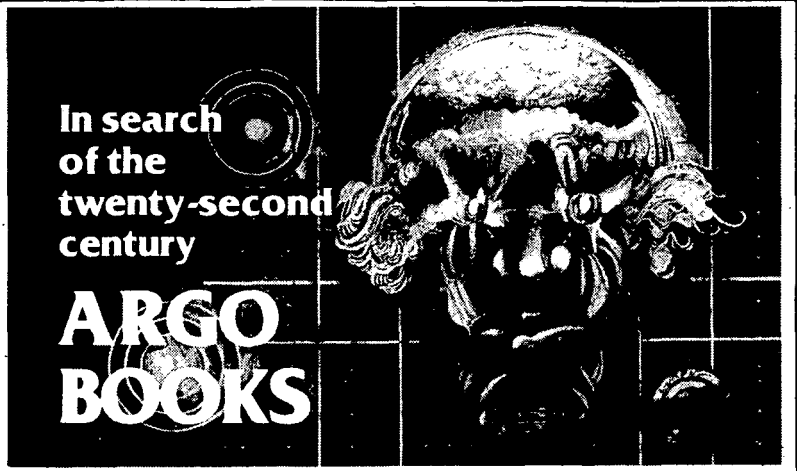

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Michael Reaves wrote "The Sound of Something Dying," (May 1976) and "Shadetree," (September 1977). His new story is a suspenseful thriller about an out-of-work actor, a series of bizarre Hollywood murders and a persistent Santa Ana windstorm that mysteriously coincides with the killings.

Werewind

BY

J. MICHAEL REAVES

Warning everyone to stay off the streets if possible, particularly in the coastal and canyon areas. The winds have been clocked at forty-five miles an hour, and the Tujunga and Beverly Glen fires are still out of control. Travelers' advisories are posted for all freeways, Angeles Crest and the Grapevine. I repeat, please do not drive unless absolutely necessary.

"In other news, the Hollywood Scalper's fifth victim has been identified as Karen Lacey, a twenty-two-year-old actress. The pattern of mutilation murders connected with show business thus continues...."

Simon Drake turned the car radio's volume down when he heard a sudden grating sound in the old Chrysler's engine. Holding his breath, he turned off Hollywood Boulevard onto a side street, and a moment later the engine quit, and the car coasted to a stop near an empty parking lot.

"Oh, *Christ!*" Simon twisted the key several times, but the only result was the ominous grinding noise. He slumped back against the hot plastic seat cover and watched the palm trees near Sunset slowly shredding in the wind. "That's it," he muttered. "I've lost the part." He grimaced in disgust, then winced as his chapped lips cracked.

He was thirty-three years old and had ninety-one dollars in the bank. His rent was overdue, and his boss at the Cahuenga Liquor Store had told him not to bother coming back when he had left for his latest interview. And now he was going to miss that interview, and probably a role he wanted more than anything, because of engine trouble.

Simon slammed his hands against the steering wheel. Sweat blurred his

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vision. The car's interior was stifling; he had the windows up despite the ninety-degree weather. It was impossible to drive otherwise during a Santa Ana windstorm; the hot dry gusts struck like solid blows. Simon looked about. There was no one on this street and only a few people crossing the intersection at Hollywood Boulevard. The wind kept most people indoors. A newspaper was slashed in half by his car's aerial. The wind howled. It hadn't stopped in six days; it wasn't going to stop now, just because he had to walk to a phone.

He sighed and opened the door, pushing with all of his hundred and fifty pounds against the wind. His eyes began to water behind his sunglasses. The gusts tore at the permanent his agent had suggested. The air smelled of smoke; sepia clouds from the canyon fires covered most of the sky. The baleful sunlight was appropriate lighting for his life, Simon thought as he walked toward the boulevard, leaning into the wind. He looked at his watch and realized he could not reach Marathon Studios on time now.

He stifled a yawn as he walked; he had gotten little sleep the night before, due to a neighbor's Doberman. The dog had barked all night at the wind. He watched the cars creeping cautiously along. A Dodge van cut in front of a Mercedes, and the little old lady driving the latter hit the horn and shouted a curse. Simon, watching her, stepped on a wad of chewing gum and kicked his foot free with the same curse. The wind fanned anger like it fanned the canyon fires. Even so, Simon felt that he had much to be angry about. He had come to LA from New York five years before, a graduate of a good actors' school, with several commercials and plays to his credit. His fascination was horror movies; his ambition, to be the next Boris Karloff. But so far he had barely been able to stay alive with a few bit parts on Saturday morning TV shows and a role in a low-budget vampire spoof. He had expected it to be hard. He had expected to struggle. But for five years?

Near a hot dog stand he saw a pay phone. As he reached for it, a spark he could see in the sunlight arced from his finger to the metal casing, painfully. He was too tired even to curse. He put his last dime in and dialed.

The greasy smell from the hot dog stand reminded him that he had had no breakfast or lunch. For the last month he had been living mostly on money from his part-time job, which was not nearly enough for the rent plus photographs and resumé xeroxes. So he had not bought groceries for two weeks.

During those same two weeks, however, Simon's agent had convinced Martin Knox, who was producing a horror picture, to consider Simon for the lead. Knox had been dubious, but after several tests Simon was still in the running. Or had been...Martin Knox's temper was legendary in the Industry, and he did not like to be kept waiting.

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Simon wanted the part, and not only for economic reasons. He was sure that he could do things with the character that would win an Oscar, the first for a horror picture lead since Fredric March in the 1931 *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. He watched the tourists and locals as he waited for the studio switchboard to put him through. The Hollywood freaks would not be out in force until after dark, but some had already braved the heat and the wind. Krishna folk with tambourines and Jesus Freaks with tracts eyed each other warily. Aging hippies, long hair beginning to gray, shuffled by. And of course, there were the few too strange for any description. The Hollywood Scalper, Simon was sure, would look tame in a line-up with some of these. He saw Trapper Jake approaching: an old man, but still tall and burly, with long braided hair, a Bowie knife and pouch and hand-stitched buckskin clothes. Despite appearances, he was an amiable sort; once, while Simon and a date had waited in a movie line, he had regaled them with a story of being raised by bears in Yosemite. Simon turned and huddled against the phone stall. He wanted no tales from Trapper Jake today.

Martin Knox answered the phone. "Hello, Simon." His voice was barely audible over the wind. "Why aren't you here?" He sounded annoyed.

"Car trouble, Mr. Knox. I was hoping we could reschedule—?"

"I see." Silence for a moment. Simon could picture Knox vividly, sitting owl-like behind his desk, eyes hooded. "Well, I'm afraid it won't be necessary, Simon. I think we'll be going with another actor. Your tests make you look too short for the part."

Simon tightened his fingers around the receiver. "I'm five-eleven," he said.

"You're also late." The phone clicked, and a dial tone began.

Simon hung up carefully, not allowing himself to slam the receiver onto the hook, not allowing himself any feelings at all. Not thinking about how much he had wanted this part, about what he could have done with it. So you want to be in pictures, he said to himself.

He dug into his pocket and came up with a lone nickel. He stared at it, realizing that he couldn't even call a tow truck. He closed his hand over the nickel suddenly, digging fingernails into his palm.

A gust of wind hit the phone stall hard enough to shake the phone; it gurgled and dropped his dime into the return bin. Simon fished it out and looked at it, stifling a sudden strong urge to laugh. Christ, he thought. My SAG dues are coming up, too.

He called a tow truck, then stood staring across Hollywood Boulevard, wishing he knew someone he could call and talk to. In five years he had made few friends here. Usually he was too busy to feel the lack of companionship; hustling parts and working took up all of his time. But occasionally the loneli-

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ness would hit him hard.

The heat waves from the street, when not scattered by the wind, gave the scene a wavering, dreamlike appearance. Sometimes it seemed to him as if all Los Angeles was a mirage, populated by ghosts. The very ground was insubstantial, prone to earthquakes, and the city's main product was fantasy. Simon stood there, overwhelmed by loneliness and a sense of unreality. Then a sudden loud noise—an empty soft-drink can, propelled by the wind—made him jump nervously backward. He collided with someone and felt himself seized in a powerful grip and spun roughly about. "You watch who the *hell* you're knocking around!" a voice shouted, and he was pushed violently into the hot dog stand; the sharp edge of the counter dug into his back. Half-stunned by surprise and pain, Simon saw that it was amiable Trapper Jake who had pushed him. The giant old man, resembling in beard and buckskin the bear he claimed had raised him, came toward Simon. His face was choleric with rage and both fists were raised. Passersby stopped to watch with interest.

Simon ran past the phone stall toward the edge of the building. Jake changed course to intercept him, but at that moment a particularly strong burst of wind upset an overflowing wire trash bin, scattering garbage across the star-inlaid sidewalk. Jake slipped on a paper plate greased with chili and sprawled headlong through the trash, to the vast amusement of the stand's patrons. Simon did not wait to see what would happen next; he turned the corner and ran. The wind seemed almost to help him, lifting him in great lunar leaps down the deserted side street. He ran, full of panic, elbows pumping, lungs sucking in the crackling air. The fear combined with his hunger to exhaust him quickly. He reached the empty parking lot by his car, stumbled across the low chain at its edge and collapsed. The hot blacktop, dusted with light ash from the fires, scorched his cheek and arms. With a groan of pain he rolled into the shade of a nearby brick building.

He lay there for a few minutes, sobbing with pain and anger. He pounded both scraped hands painfully against the rough asphalt. There had to be an end to this run of bad luck—he would make an end to it, somehow! Someway, he promised himself, aware of the last-reel triteness of it and not caring, he would make of this moment a turning point. He wanted to act, and to eat three times a day; he wanted his name, eventually, on a sidewalk star. And he wanted that role more than he wanted breath in his lungs. He wanted it, and he intended to have it.

The wind was still blowing; harder now, it seemed. Simon looked about him. There was no one in the lot's kiosk. Against the adjoining wall was a large trash bin; a department store mannikin with a broken head grinned, one-eyed, at him. The sun, like a spot-

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light with a red gel, cast crimson light over the scene. Simon felt again a dreamlike quality suffusing everything. He could hear the wind, but it seemed somehow distant. The feeling was that of loneliness and waiting.

The wind howled.

A dust devil blew into the parking lot, a skittering whirl of hot dry air, picking up litter and dust and the fine white ash from the fires and spinning it all about. But instead of coming apart after a moment, it kept spinning, faster and faster. It began to shrink. The debris that had defined it before was flung from it. There was only dust and ash now, and then not even that; just a silvery spinning of air, growing denser.

It was assuming a human shape.

The wind was still blowing, but it did not disturb the whirling shape. There was a breathless tension to the air around Simon. The shape coalesced, solidified....

It became a woman.

She seemed younger than Simon, with silver hair and pale skin. She was naked. Though she looked solid, she seemed also insubstantial, as though she would blur or become transparent if viewed from another angle. Her face was beautiful, but somehow he could not make out her features clearly. Her eyes were wide and blank, like unminted silver coins.

She smiled at him. The smile would have been touching had it not been for the blank eyes; they made it hideous. It was a smile full of yearning, full of gratitude, of waiting at last fulfilled. Two steps toward Simon she took. He drew back against the wall, making a high, thin sound in his throat. She hesitated—and then a gust seized her, spun her around like a ballerina, faster and faster, until her hair was a thinning silver stain in the air, and the lines of her body ran like pale paint.

Then she was gone, and Simon was alone in the lot, save for the cry of the wind.

It had been a hallucination, of course. That was the only possible explanation. Considering the stress he had been under it was a wonder he had not seen the Beast from 20,000 Fathoms in that parking lot. So Simon told himself, starting as he stumbled out of the lot and continuing for the rest of the day. By evening, he had almost convinced himself of it.

Hallucination or not, he had made a promise to himself, lying there in the parking lot. He did not intend to let the part in Knox's picture escape him. He had been invited to a party the following evening, and he knew that Martin Knox would also be there. Perhaps Simon could persuade him to reconsider.

He arrived late at the small house deep in the maze of Laurel Canyon. He had almost changed his mind about coming; the thought of confronting Knox did unpleasant things to his stomach. But he had to make the ef-

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fort. Also, he did not receive invitations to many parties.

Jon Shea, the host, handed him a drink at the door. He was also an actor, tall and well-built—he and Simon were members of the same gym. "How've you been, Simon?" Jon asked. "You're looking a bit wasted."

"Haven't been getting much sleep," Simon said. "Neighbor's dog keeps me up all night." He always felt slightly uncomfortable around Jon—any criticism, no matter how minor, from him always produced in Simon a need to explain and justify. Jon Shea was only a year older than Simon, but he had done much better as an immigrant New York actor: three movies and currently featured player in a TV series. Simon resented him for it, and disliked himself for feeling that way.

"This damn wind keeps me awake," Jon said. "My grandma says —she's from the old country, you know—" Simon recalled that Jon's name had been longer and full of consonants before his agency suggested a change— "anyway, she says a wind like this is a devil wind, an evil spirit—hey, are you okay?"

Simon had stopped in the hallway and leaned against the redwood wall. "Fine. Drink's a little strong...what did your grandmother say about the wind?"

"Oh, she's got a lot of old stories like that." He looked past Simon into the living room, where people circulated. "Gotta go play host. Lots of ladies around. Find yourself one." Then he was gone, before Simon could stop him.

Simon walked slowly through the small, cozy house, edging his way around groups of people, still feeling the coldness that had gripped his gut when Jon had mentioned his grandmother's theory about the wind. He thought about the apparition in the parking lot. Coincidence, he said to himself, sounding the word out syllable by syllable, chanting it as he might a mantra. Coincidence. A comforting word to know.

Disco accompanied his nervous heartbeat. The windows rattling in the wind sounded occasionally above the music. Simon rubbed the cool glass he held against one check as he paused in the doorway of the game room. An overhead light and ceiling fan hung over the pool table, where Knox was sinking the last ball. Several onlookers applauded as the cushion shot hit the pocket. The only one not watching was a woman with short dark hair, playing a Pachenko machine in a far corner.

Knox raised his glass to the applause and started out of the room. A large man in a dark suit followed him. Simon took a deep breath and stepped forward as Knox was about to pass him. "Mr. Knox," he said, smiling. That was as far as he got before a large hand encircled his arm, fingers meeting thumb easily. Simon looked up at the man accompanying Knox. He was

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very large; his face was battered and slightly bored. A pair of black, horn-rimmed glasses looked startlingly incongruous on him.

"It's all right, Daniel," Knox said. Simon's arm was released. He recalled that many people in the Industry had hired bodyguards in the past week, since the Scalper killings began. "Thank you," Simon said to Knox, somehow keeping the smile in place. "I just wanted to talk to you a bit more about the lead in your picture."

Knox's face was expressionless. "What exactly did you want to say?"

Simon dropped the smile for a serious look. The thought crossed his mind that he was acting harder now than he ever had in his life. "Frankly, I hope to talk you into reconsidering. I feel I'm right for the part."

Knox's face was as motionless as a freeze frame. "I'm afraid it's too late for that. Terrence Froseth is set for the part. I've already talked with his agent—"

Simon did not know who Terrence Froseth was, and did not care. Realizing that pressing the issue was bad form, he nevertheless plunged ahead. "It's never too late," he said intensely. "After all, Gable wasn't the first choice for *Gone With the Wind*. Karloff wasn't the first choice for the monster in *Frankenstein*."

"You put yourself in good company," Knox said dryly. "I must say your persistence is admirable, though you need to learn some manners...if Froseth cannot take the part for any reason, perhaps we shall talk further. That's all I'll say on the matter." He walked down the hallway. Daniel looked coolly at Simon and followed.

Someone in the room turned on a small television set, and a news anchorman's voice filled the air. "—as of this evening the latest fire in Topanga is under control. To repeat, the wind has increased slightly since yesterday, and driving is still hazardous.

"Police have not released the identity of the latest victim of the Hollywood Scalper, but they do confirm that he was a film director. This is the sixth Scalper victim in as many days...."

The conversation had stopped, and the room's occupants were gathered intently around the set as Simon walked down the hall. He stood before a window and watched the trees, ghastly in orange and green lawn lights, thrashing in the wind. It had been blowing for a solid week. It suddenly occurred to him that the Hollywood Scalper's spree had started the day after the Santa Anas had begun to blow. The wind makes people crazy, he thought, remembering Trapper Jake.

The Hollywood Scalper was yet another item of worry: a psychotic who only killed show business people, knifing them and then cutting a small scalplock from them, which he presumably kept. But all the victims to date had been people more advanced in their careers than Simon was. Surely

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he was beneath the Scalper's notice.

He was still staring out the window when there suddenly appeared before him a pale, transparent face, floating in the night. He turned with a gasp—someone was standing behind him. Simon sighed in relief. For an instant, the shape of her face and the effect of the reflection had made him think—

The dark-haired woman from the game room stepped back a pace. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Simon smiled. "No problem. I—thought you were someone else."

She smiled as well. "My name's Molly Harren—and you're Simon Drake. I saw you in that movie—"

"Oh God, no," he said, hiding his head in mock despair. "Don't tell me you saw *Disco Dracula!*"

"You were good," she said, laughing, as did he. "The movie was abysmal, of course, but you were good." Simon grinned at her. Her black hair framed a fascinating face, with large, dark liquid eyes. Though she was laughing at the moment, he could see that her normal expression was studious, almost intense. She wore a sleeveless evening dress, and it showed her to be in very good shape—not merely sleek and well-fed like most of the people there, but lean, with graceful curves of musculature. She obviously kept herself in shape with more than the obligatory morning jog. And her name sounded familiar..."Are you an actress?"

"No. A writer."

It hit him then, and his jaw dropped. "You wrote *Blackout!*"

She nodded. "But that wasn't my title. I called it *The Dark Side of Town.*"

He had been about to compliment her on the screenplay—it had been one of his favorite recent suspense films, about a psychotic terrorizing a town during a power failure. Instead he said, "That's a much better title."

She nodded, pursing her lips in disgust. "The studios are all into monosyllabic titles now. 'Easier audience understanding.' They're talking a sequel, and of course they want to call it *Blackout II.* So imaginative." Then she shook her head and smiled. "Sorry. I—well, I overheard your conversation with Knox. I just wanted you to know that I understand how you feel. It isn't easy dealing with them sometimes."

Conversation came easily after that. They discussed her screenplay and his career, and the common interest they shared in horror and suspense films. Simon forgot about the disappointment of losing the Marathon part, at least momentarily. It had been quite some time since he had met a woman he could talk with so easily, one with whom he shared so many interests. He was aware once again of how lonely he had been, because now, for a time, he was not.

It was almost two a.m. when they noticed people leaving. "I'd better be going," Molly said. "It was very nice meeting you, Simon."

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They were sitting on a rattan couch under a framed one-sheet poster of one of Jon Shea's three movies. Simon glanced at it as they stood and only realized later that he did not feel the usual pang of jealously. He considered and discarded several clever come-on lines and instead said simply, "I'd like to follow you home, Molly."

She smiled slightly, almost wistfully. "I think I'd like for you to—but not tonight, I'm afraid. Why don't we get together for lunch—say, Wednesday?"

Wednesday was fine with him. He offered to walk her to her car. When they stepped outside, the wind struck at them savagely. Simon leaned into it, his shirt collar whipping at his neck, as he watched her drive away in a pale Fiat. The wind was strong enough to buffet the small car over the white line several times—he hoped she reached home safely.

His own car was still in the shop, and so he walked home, down Laurel Canyon to Hollywood, up Highland to Franklin. It was a long, nervous walk. Black and white patrol cars, spectral under the mercury lamps, cruised the streets. He was two blocks from his apartment when one stopped him and, after checking his ID, gave him a ride the rest of the way. It was after three when he wearily climbed the steps to his second-story apartment in the hills above Cahuenga. The building was one of the older, Spanish-style constructions, with pantiles and archways and a small open court filled with cactus and jacaranda. Simon could smell the heavy scent of the flowers, now strong, now faint, as the wind gusted. He could hear the power lines above the building humming, and he could also hear the Doberman in the yard next door barking. He saw it, a black shape restlessly prowling the driveway beyond the cyclone fence. It would be another sleepless night.

The street's acoustics made the wind sound sometimes like wolves howling, sometimes like babies screaming. Something flickered in the corner of Simon's vision as he stepped onto his porch; he heard a sharp *crack!* like a whip. He turned quickly and saw that a TV antenna line had come loose and was flapping against a wall across the street. All the way home he had felt like a character in a Val Lewton film, sure that someone or something had been following him, constantly looking behind him at the skirling leaves and clattering debris that the wind hurled about. He stared down at the deserted street, leached of color by the moon. The wind now sounded like the the wailing of lost souls. He could not have felt more alone if he were the last man on Earth; he wished desperately that Molly had said yes.

Despite the night sounds, he managed to fall asleep, but not for long. He dreamed that someone was sinking in a black lake, calling to him, stretching long white arms out to him. He awoke with a start, still hearing his name being called.

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The water bed rocked him gently as he rubbed his eyes. His body and shorts were damp with sweat. He looked at the luminous face of his watch: four-thirty. The wind still blew outside, but the dog had stopped barking. He felt more tired than ever. Understandable, with nightmares of someone drowning and calling his name....

He heard the call again.

Simon lay quite still. Over the ceaseless rise and fall of the wind he had heard his name—a long, wailing cry, faint, breathless, like the cry of a woman drowning. He lay and listened with his entire body. And it came again: *Simonnn*...drawn out and whispered, almost as though the wind itself had cried to him...

It *was* the wind! He heard it again, the rising whistle outside shaping itself into his name. He stared at the ceiling, not daring to turn his head, afraid to look at the silvered square of the window, knowing he would have to when the call came again.

Simonnn....

He turned his head toward the window.

Limned in the moonlight, hair like streamers of fog, she stared at him with eyes cold as stars.

Simon rolled over and out of the bed with a cry and ran down the hall. The light of the full moon, coming through the living room window, spotlighted a large poster of Lon Chaney, Jr., as the Wolf Man. It seemed to be coming out of the poster toward him, jaws opening wide; Simon gasped, turned and stumbled into a hanging planter. The leaves scratched his face like spiders' legs. He clawed open the front door, lunging outside into the hot moving air, not thinking, simply running. He looked down from the porch at the street—shadows crawled in the wind. Then something—a blown leaf, his hair, or *her hand* —brushed his cheek. With a shriek he leaped down the tiled steps, tripped and fell, scrambled to his feet, turned—

She stood before him.

She was not more than three feet away. As before, she appeared corporeal and yet ghostly. Her hair floated behind her like gossamer web. Her eyes were still silver wells, looking at him but not seeing him. Her expression was that of ineffable loneliness and longing.

She reached for him.

Simonnn....

He did not see her lips move; the wind seemed to whisper his name. Frozen with fear, he saw the approaching hands very clearly: they were as pale and smooth as blown snow, no trace of fingerprints or veining. Her lips parted in a smiling rictus, and behind them was only darkness....

Simon shut his eyes and flung himself backwards, hands flailing the air before him. He felt one pass through coldness, and then he had turned and was plunging through a flowerbed, not feeling the cactus rake his bare legs,

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fingers hooking into the links of the cyclone fence, the wind tearing, shrieking at him He pulled himself up and over the fence, fell against cool concrete and heard a low growl nearby. He realized then where he had fled.

The Doberman leaped, a shadow with gleaming teeth. Simon lurched to his feet and ran, knowing it was useless. Then, above the wind's howling, he heard a crackling sound. He ran against a wall, knocking the breath from his lungs and falling. He turned over and saw that one of the high-tension lines from the power pole overhead had come loose. Like a sparkling whip it fell, lashing the charging dog squarely across the back. The dog's growl changed to an agonized yelp—the force of the shock hurled it across the driveway to land, quivering, against the fence. The broken power line danced and scattered sparks across the concrete.

Simon looked about him quickly, but there was no sign of her anywhere. The only sounds were the wind and the hissing of the power line. Oddly enough, all the noise had not aroused the neighbors. He looked at the dog—it had stopped quivering.

The wind brought the smell of burned flesh to him, and he turned away to be sick.

Hey, Simon," Jon Shea said. "You're just in time to applaud. I'm going for two-seventy-five today."

Simon had just entered the workout area of the Golden West Health Spa. The large room, walled with mirrors, was filled with men working body-building equipment. An AM rock station played over the members' grunts and groans. Jon lay prone on a bench press, seized the bar and raised it over his chest, straining as he lifted a stack of weights six times. He rose slowly, skin shining with sweat, and looked at Simon. "You don't look good. Maybe you shouldn't work out."

"I—didn't get much sleep last night," Simon replied. He was pale, and he leaned against a rack of barbells. His legs still smarted from the cactus and the fall onto the driveway. "I just came in to ask you a question," he continued.

"Sure. Shoot."

Simon stared through the floor-to-ceiling window at the jogging track outside. No one was jogging, despite the rarity of a smog-free day. The wind vibrated the glass before him and he stepped back hastily.

"Your grandmother called this a demon wind, you said. What did she mean?"

Jon blinked in surprise. "Oh, it's just legends, you know. They had stories about werewinds, that were supposed to take human shape—you better sit down, you look awful."

Simon did so. "Go on, please," he said faintly.

Jon scratched his head. "I don't re-

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member that much about it...they're not evil so much as just lonely, sort of lost souls, I guess. You know how the wind is always described as sounding lonely? Well, the werewind is drawn to lonely people." He peered closely at Simon, who was staring out the window at the wind-shook spires of the Chinese Theatre. "Why the interest?"

"Oh...I had an idea it might make a good horror movie."

Jon snorted. "Everybody's a writer. But I think you're too late on that one. Molly Harren asked me about it days ago."

Simon asked, "How do you stop a werewind?"

"That's what Molly asked. I'll tell you what I told her—look in the library. I don't remember. It's all bullshit anyway."

"Yeah," Simon said, standing. "Right." He opened the door to leave, but at that moment the music piped into the spa stopped, and a voice said: "This is a news bulletin from KCCO. Yet another Hollywood Scalper victim has been found, this one in West Los Angeles. The body has been identified as that of Terrence Froseth, a young actor. This is the seventh Scalper victim in seven days...."

Simon saw Jon go pale beneath his tan. Across the floor, another actor released his grip on a pulley and a stack of weights crashed down.

Simon leaned against the door, feeling quite weak. He felt a number of other emotions as well: horror and sympathy were among them. But the dominant feeling was a hideous sense of relief. And unbidden into his mind came a thought that disgusted him: I'm back in the running again.

Outside, the wind howled.

Simon left the gym and took a bus down to Mannie's Auto Repair on Melrose. He gave Mannie a check, wondering vaguely how he would cover it, then drove downtown to the main branch of the Los Angeles Library. There he spent several hours under the high, carved ceilings leafing through books of legends and superstitions.

He found several spells to make the wind blow, and a few references to various kinds of wind demons and manifestations both malign and benign. At last he discovered a passing reference to the legend of the werewind. According to the paragraph, the werewind could be bound by tying knots in a length of hair. The stronger the wind, the more knots were required, and it would not abate until the last knot had been tied. The passage cited an in-depth work on the subject in *The Omnibus of the Occult*, but when he looked for that book, he found that it had already been checked out.

Simon stood before the card catalogue files and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes until green patterns spun in the darkness. He was not quite sure what to do next. He told himself that he should be out job-

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hunting, or looking through the trades and nagging his agent. But he did not move. He stood quietly, wishing he could stop the thoughts that whirled like dust devils through his head.

Such an apparition simply could not be—at least, not as he stood there with the sun streaming through the latticed windows. And so, Simon thought, I am probably having a nervous breakdown. He clasped his hands together to stop their trembling. Was any career worth this? But on the other hand, what else could he do? At thirty-three, with only odd jobs behind him, how could he hope to make a decent living even if he was interested in anything other than acting? He had been through worse times. He had lived in a Greenwich Village loft without heat during the winter while auditioning for plays. Things had gotten better since then. They would get better still, he told himself. Persistence, determination; those were the keys, even more than talent. Knox had indicated that he would reconsider if Froseth could not take the part. And Froseth certainly could not take the part now. He was dead.

And did the Hollywood Scalper or someone like him lie in wait for the next lead as well? Who knew—who could decipher the motivations of a sociopath? The wind seemed to encourage such psychotics—he had heard that there had already been one copycat killing similar to the Scalper's work. If Simon came into the limelight, might he not be the next victim?

He shook his head. He could not let fear rule him. Acting was his life—it had to be worth risking his life for. He wanted the lead in that picture more than he had ever wanted any role. He would wait a day or so, out of respect to the dead, and then call Knox again.

The library would be closing soon; he turned toward the exit. It was rush hour now. Usually he tried to avoid the bumper-to-bumper crawl of freeway traffic, but he knew that today he would feel safer driving in that sluggish flow, surrounded by cars and people. In the wind.

"—we repeat, Los Angeles police have taken into custody twenty-seven-year-old Greg Corey. He is charged with the Hollywood Scalper murders that have terrorized Los Angeles for the past eight days...."

Simon heard the news while driving down La Cienega toward a health food restaurant where he was to meet Molly for lunch. He almost cheered out loud. Things at last seemed to be looking up! According to the report, it was a virtual certainty that the suspect was the Scalper—he had been caught in an attack on a producer and had admitted to the other slayings. Thank God, Simon thought. At least I don't have to worry about that any more.

He found Molly sitting at a corner table, all but hidden by a large potted fern. The corner was dark save for a candle's glow; after the merciless

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sunlight, Simon could see little except dazzle. "I hope you don't mind," she said. "I like seclusion when I eat." She looked different; he realized her hair was longer. She was wearing a fall.

They ordered. "Did you hear the news?" he asked. "The Hollywood Scalper's been caught."

She nodded and smiled. "But not before your competition was removed."

Simon blinked, somewhat nonplused and secretly uncomfortable because of his similar thoughts. "Well, of course, I don't look at it that way—"

"I understand," she said. "It is a terrible thing, but you mustn't let that stop you from taking advantage of it." She frowned at his expression. "Does that sound ruthless? I guess I am rather ruthless—you have to be in this town if you care about your art at all. If you have to work with people who think that having money gives them the right to dictate creativity."

Simon felt vaguely uncomfortable at her intensity. "Well, I haven't been in a position to argue with them too much. And I'm under no delusions about the artistic quality of my work so far."

"Everyone has to start somewhere. You were good in that cheap film; you don't have to worry. But the frustration applies more to me than to you, because I'm a writer. The film *starts* with me. No matter how good the actor, the director, the effects, *et cetera*, without a good script, the film is nothing. And so when a good script is written and they ruin it, it's a crime. More—it's a sin. You see?"

He saw that this was obviously her holy crusade, and so he merely nodded, though privately he felt that an actor's interpretation of a script was just as important as the script. Their lunch arrived and they spoke of other things. "I've raised the money to produce my latest script," she said. "That way, no idiot can ruin my work—if it fails it will be my fault. But this damned Santa Ana weather is delaying production. I'm losing money each day the wind blows. Not to mention nearly losing my house in Topanga to the fire."

Simon agreed with considerable feeling that the wind must stop soon. The subject changed, and he told her how much he wanted the lead in Knox's picture.

Molly nodded. "Martin Knox is one of the few good producers. Be careful of him, though; he has a temper, and money to back it up."

Simon looked stubborn. "I *know* I'm right for that part."

"Then you will probably get it, now that Froseth is dead. The show must go on—people have to have their fix of cinematic fantasy." She sounded slightly bitter. "The hell of it is, movies and TV are what's real to the rest of the world. Not us—not the ones responsible. We're just ghosts."

Her use of the word startled him. They split the check and left the cool interior for the wind and the sun.

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The wind struck them both with a hard, dry gust as they descended the brick steps to the parking lot—Molly missed her footing and almost fell. Simon grabbed her arm, steadying her. "Thanks!" she shouted over the howling. "I really think this goddamn wind is out to get me."

Again her innocent words jarred him; he looked quickly, fearfully, around the parking lot, but there was no sign of the werewind. They walked over to her car and hesitated in the inevitable awkward moment of goodbye. Simon realized that he was very much afraid of her leaving him today—afraid to be alone again. "Molly," he said, "I'd like to invite you back to my place. I—it's not a come-on, really." The truth surprised him. He was not thinking of sex at all. He simply wanted to be with her; almost as big a fear as the werewind was the fear of his loneliness.

She looked away from him at the distant Hollywood Hills, clear and sharp in the dry air. The wind tore at her long dark fall; he wondered fleetingly why she wore it on such a day. At last she said, "I'm tempted." She chuckled as though surprised at herself. "You don't know what it takes to admit even that much; we Hollywood ghosts shy away from emotional commitments." She looked at him, then took his face in her hands and kissed him lightly on the mouth. The wind staggered them, almost ruined the moment. "I appreciate the offer very much, but...no. I have work that must be done."

"I understand, but—" the wind pushed them against the car. "Goddamn it!" Simon shouted, losing his temper and striking futilely at the air.

"Relax. You can't stop it that way," she said. "You've more important things to think about, like talking to Martin Knox. Let me know how that turns out, okay?"

He nodded. Then she was in the car and backing out of the lot. He saw a smile thrown his way, and then she was gone. The sound of the engine was quickly lost in the wind's roar.

Too late, he thought of asking her what she knew about the werewind. Jon had told him she was possibly thinking about a script based on it. Simon shuddered. He would not want to be in it.

The streets were almost deserted. The news station said that the wind in the canyons at times reached near-hurricane force. Simon drove carefully. He saw one lone pedestrian on his way back to his apartment—a tall woman with silver hair, standing on a corner of Santa Monica Boulevard. His heartbeat shook him for an instant before he realized that it was one of the few hookers still braving the wind. She looked at him with flat curiosity. He drove on.

At home the mail contained a notice from his answering service that he

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was being dropped for nonpayment. Simon hurled the notice at the wall. The fact that it was too light to strike with any degree of force and instead only drifted to the floor increased his anger. He seized the telephone, tempted to throw it; instead he sat down and pressed the number of Marathon Studios. He had intended to wait a day or so, but he had been waiting too long, he told himself.

There was a long wait after he gave the secretary his name, during which time Simon breathed deeply to relax. I will not sound eager or get angry, he told himself. I will offer my condolences and then ask about the part. After all, as Molly had said, the show must go on.

"Yes, Simon."

"I just wanted to say I was sorry to hear about Froseth, Mr. Knox."

"Yes, it is a tragedy." Knox's voice was emotionless.

"A pity they couldn't have caught the Scalper before this." Simon hesitated; Knox said nothing. "Have you given any thought to a replacement? I know this is rather quick, but...."

He trailed off. Knox said, "I'm sorry, Simon, but after further thought, I still don't think you'd be right for the part."

Simon heard someone say, "Am I still too short, Mr. Knox? I could wear stacked heels, you know."

"It's not exactly—"

"Or am I 'too' something else?" Simon realized that he was saying these words to Knox; he listened, faintly embarrassed, as if he were a bystander eavesdropping on a quarrel. "Am I too tall now? Too fat, maybe? Too thin?"

"We have your resumé on file," Knox said distantly. "Good-bye, Simon."

Simon sat listening numbly to the dial tone. It's over, he thought. I've done it now.

He hung up and stared out the window at the waving trees. He listened to the wind—the omnipresent, maddening wind. That was the cause of it all, he thought. He had been doing okay until the wind had started, so long ago. The future had not looked particularly bright, but he had been able to handle the pressure. Now he had ruined everything because of that damned wind....

The dial tone gave way to a siren; he depressed the cradle button, then began to punch his agent's number. He stopped before hitting the last digit. What would he say? Well, Sid, I went a little crazy, started yelling at Martin Knox, so I'll be about as welcome at Marathon now as the Scalper would be at Disneyland. He hung up again, then looked at the clock. It was after six—Knox would have left the studio by now. If I could talk to him again, Simon thought, face to face. Apologize. Explain about the wind, how it had sawed away at his nerves...it was understandable, surely....

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It took several phone calls to learn Knox's home address; he finally got it from Jon Shea. Simon told Jon part of what had happened, and Jon tried to counsel a different course: "Let it lie for a while, Simon. Give him a call in a few days; maybe the wind'll die down by then, everybody'll be back to normal. We've all been under stress—he understands that. But don't push it now. He's got a temper, too...."

He did not listen. That evening he drove west on Sunset, toward the ocean. As usual, there were few cars out; even on the Strip the lanes were clear. The wind hammered at the Chrysler. As the evening grew darker, Simon had to restrain himself from driving faster. Near Beverly Glen the boulevard was blocked off—he had to detour around UCLA. Ashes from the canyon fire fell like dirty snowflakes; at one point he had to turn on his wipers.

It was almost dark when he reached Knox's house in Pacific Palisades. The day's end washed the ocean in neon red and orange. Knox's house was on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Coast Highway. Simon parked at one end of the long, curved driveway, next to a lawn mower and a trash can full of shrubbery clippings left by a gardener.

He had given no thought to what he would say—he had not thought at all during the long drive. He pressed the doorbell and stood before the massive, carved door. It opened; Martin Knox stared at him in disbelief.

"What the hell do you want?"

"To apologize," Simon said.

"This is absurd." Knox began to close the door.

"Wait, please," Simon said; then, as the door continued to close, he suddenly shouted, "I said *wait!*" and grabbed it. The burst of anger had struck like a wind gust and vanished as quickly, but it had done its harm—it had aroused Knox's temper. "That does it," the producer said in a low voice. He turned and shouted, "Daniel!"

Simon stepped off the porch into the wind. "Mr. Knox, I only came to apologize...it's the wind, don't you see? It's making everyone crazy...."

Knox opened the door again, and Daniel stood beside him. "Throw him off the property," Knox said. "Don't be too gentle."

Simon backed up as Daniel came toward him. The wind whirled about them. Daniel approached quickly, looking bored. Simon turned and ran toward his car, fumbling his keys from his pocket. He had parked near the edge of the bluff. He stabbed the keys at the door lock; living in Hollywood had habituated him to locking the car. Daniel came around the front of the car and reached for him.

As he did, a blast of wind knocked Simon off balance; he fell backward, away from the huge bodyguard. The same gust knocked the gardener's can over. The wind seized the leaves and grass trimmings and spun them in a green flurry across the lawn. As Dan-

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iel bent to seize Simon's shirt, the cloud of leaves and grass struck them like confetti, swirling around them, blinding them. Daniel waved his arms, staggered to one side—and slipped, falling over the bluff.

Simon screamed. He crawled to the edge, looking down. It was not a sheer drop to the highway below, but it was close enough. He saw Daniel's motionless dark form sprawled on the steep slope.

He stood carefully, holding onto the car. He looked back toward the house and saw Knox standing in the doorway, staring at him. He knew it appeared as if he had pushed Daniel over the cliff. Knox slammed the door. He's calling the police, Simon thought.

But another thought came to him, far more terrifying than that. There was a pattern to these events: when the wind struck, *she* appeared.

The Chrysler spun out of the driveway and down the winding road toward Sunset. Simon had no idea where he was going. He merely wanted to get away, to escape what he knew would surely come to him—the soulless, smiling werewind. He breathed raggedly, looking about frantically for any sign of her. There was none. He began to wonder where he could go.

Not back to his apartment, surely. He needed someone he could trust, someone he could tell what had happened. Molly. It had to be Molly.

She had said she lived in Topanga, in an A-frame on Grandview Drive. He did not have her number with him, did not know if she was home, but he started north on the Pacific Coast Highway nonetheless. She *had* to be home!

Soon he was driving recklessly up the winding road between sheer cliffs, toward Fernwood. Black skeletal trees, remnants of the recent fire, surrounded him. The wind between the close canyon walls was like a shotgun blast. He found the street and the house, high on a hillside. Parked in the gravel driveway was her Fiat.

As he stepped out of his car, the wind knocked him off balance again; he sprawled in an untended bed of ivy beside the ramshackle porch. Scrambling to his feet, teeth clenched against screaming, he pounded on the door. Beyond the flimsy shelter of porch and bushes it seemed that demons shrieked and tore at the earth.

The yellow porch light went on above him and he saw her silhouette behind the door window. After a moment, the door opened a crack.

"Simon?" she sounded tired and confused. "What is it? What are you doing here?"

"Let me in, please, Molly," he pleaded. "Please. I'm in trouble."

"I can't, Simon." Half of her face was visible against the crack, sallow in the porch light. "I'm working on something very important—"

"*Please!*" The wind screamed about him, tugging at his hair like fingers, *her* fingers....

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Molly looked torn with indecision. At last she said, "All right, if you're in trouble. But it can only be a moment. Then you'll have to go." She opened the door and Simon entered quickly.

They stood in a small living room. A picture window in the far wall looked out on the lights of Topanga. Simon noticed distractedly that the place was a mess—dead plants in pots, clothing strewn everywhere, books and records stacked haphazardly on old, worn furniture. Far in the back of his mind he was surprised and slightly disappointed—he had thought she would be neater.

A television was on in one corner, inaudible due to the wind outside.

Molly faced him, wearing jeans and a dark T-shirt. He noticed she was not wearing her fall this time. "Well?" she said. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know where to start," he said wearily. Even inside, the wind forced him to speak loudly. The whole house shook with its force. The lights dimmed, then returned. Molly looked at them in concern.

"Simon, I don't want to turn you out if you're in trouble, but you have to hurry! The wind is getting worse!"

"I know!" he said. "Jon Shea was right! It's a werewind—I've seen it!"

Her eyes went wide and her face paled. She seized his arms in a surprisingly strong grip. *"What?"*

"We've got to try the hair," he said, aware that he was babbling and not caring. "The spell, tying knots in the hair—".

"How did you know about that?" She was shaking him, her gaze burning with sudden rage. For an instant, Simon was more afraid of her than the werewind.

And then a blast of air hit the house and the picture window exploded into the room. Simon saw it but had no time to dodge. He felt flying splinters of glass sting his cheeks, miraculously missing his eyes. And he saw the rage in Molly's face turn to shock as a score of cuts and lacerations stitched the length of her back. She sagged into his arms and he felt blood running over his hands. He looked at her back, pulled strips of her shirt, cut by the glass, away from the wounds. None appeared to be serious. He looked about for something to serve as bandages—

—and saw who stood in the shattered window, framed by the night and the jagged glass.

Simon backed up, letting Molly fall to her knees. The gales still boomed and battered outside, but did not enter the house. The werewind approached him as he retreated in terror. Behind him a narrow flight of stairs led up to darkness; Simon turned and fled up them. They opened onto a narrow loft lit by a single dim bulb. A door at the far end led out onto a porch. On the walls hung several varying lengths of dark, knotted rope; on the table was an open book. The title at the top of the page was *The Omnibus of the Occult*. Also on the table was another

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length of rope—then he realized it was hair, Molly's dark fall, with knots tied in half its length.

Simonnn....

Simon grabbed the fall, hands sweaty with terror. Simultaneously the wind struck the house again, shaking it to its foundations with a sound like thunder as she appeared at the head of the stairs, facing him.

Sobbing, Simon tied another knot in the fall. Her mouth opened in a silent scream, revealing darkness; arms extended, she came toward him. Simon backed up, whimpering, somehow managing to fumble yet another knot together. Then he turned and flung himself against the porch door as she came around the table.

He stumbled out onto the porch, into the wind.

It struck him like a giant fist, hurling him, half-stunned, against the railing. It tore at the length of hair in his hand, but somehow he managed to retain it. She followed him onto the porch, unaffected by the wind. Simon hooked one arm around the railing as the wind buffeted him, and she came closer, closer....

Hanging there over darkness, half-paralyzed with fear, he managed to twist the final knot in the length of hair as the werewind touched him with her cold hands.

The howling rose to a scream. A final blast struck him, almost hurling him from the porch—and seized her as well, tearing at her, streaming her away like mist. Simon thought he heard a single, long drawn-out cry...

And the wind stopped.

Suddenly there was silence, louder than the wind, and stillness. Simon sagged to his knees, hearing his blood pounding. Hardly daring to believe it, he pulled himself to his feet. The air was motionless. For the first time in over a week, the wind had stopped.

He began to laugh as he looked out at the night and the still trees. He did not laugh long—his throat was too dry. Welcome tears moistened his eyes and cheeks. It was over. He had won! He and Molly were safe!

Then he turned toward the house with a gasp. "Jesus. Molly!" he shouted, running back into the loft. He staggered down the stairs into the living room.

She was not there.

The TV set droned quietly in the corner, broadcasting the news.

"—I repeat, the winds seem to have stopped everywhere.

"Recapping our top story, police have admitted that Greg Corey, arrested earlier today, is not the Hollywood Scalper. New evidence shows him to be a copycat killer who imitated the Scalper's crimes. The real Scalper is still at large...."

"Molly?"

He looked closely for the first time at the fall he still held. It was not a fall. He could see very clearly the knot of flesh on one end of it, dark with dried blood. He remembered the other knot-

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ted lengths he had thought were ropes, hanging on the loft wall. He knew now that they were not ropes.

It occurred to him then that the werewind had never harmed him, had in fact saved him from Trapper Jake and the Doberman and Daniel.

Simon heard a noise behind him and turned.

Light glinted on a knife blade.

"I'm sorry, Simon," Molly said. "I did like you...."

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Mr. Dryer, who concerned himself with a breach of computer security in "Zorphwar" (August 1977), here considers another breakdown, this time with vegetable-shattering results.

An End of Spinach

BY
STAN DRYER

"Hey, Harry, I don't think we should be in here."

"Cummon, Spike, my Dad lets me come in here all the time and watch him."

"I know, but suppose he finds out we're here?"

"He won't know. See that TV monitor there? That shows the corridor outside his office so we can see him coming. Besides, we're not going to hurt anything, just talk to old Socrat a little."

"Talk to Socrat?"

"Socrat the computer, dummy, That's what my Dad does all the time. You just type in the entry code on this terminal. I'll show you. 'LOGON PEMBROKE.'"

"PLEASE ENTER YOUR PASSWORD AT THE TERMINAL."

"Harry, it spoke *out loud* to us!"

"Of course. Now I'll type the password. 'MARS.' That's what Dad used the last time."

"ENTERED PASSWORD WAS ILLEGAL."

"See, Harry, I knew you weren't supposed to use it."

"Don't be dumb, Spike. They just change the password every month. I bet my Dad uses the names of the planets starting with the Sun and working out. Let me try the next one beyond Mars. 'JUPITER.'"

"ENTERED PASSWORD WAS ILLEGAL. IF ANOTHER ILLEGAL PASSWORD IS ENTERED, AN UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY ALARM WILL BE GENERATED."

"Let's get out of here, Harry! You give it another bad password and it will ring a bell or lock the door on us!"

"Look, Spike, I know my Dad. He probably started with the names of the planets on the *outside* of the solar system and worked in. Watch this. I'll type 'EARTH.'"

"GOOD AFTERNOON, PROFESSOR PEMBROKE. SOCRAT AT YOUR SERVICE. AUDI-

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BLE INPUTS MAY BE USED."

"Wow, Harry, you did it. It thinks it's talking to your Dad."

"I told you it was easy. Now what shall we ask it to do?"

"I CANNOT PARSE YOUR AUDIBLE INPUTS. PLEASE SPEAK MORE CLEARLY."

"I was just talking to my friend Spike. Let's see. To start, can you tell us what day it is today?"

"TODAY IS TUESDAY, MAY TWELVE, NINETEEN EIGHTY-SEVEN."

"Gee, Harry, that's neat. Can it do math stuff too?"

"Sure, watch this. Socrat, what is the square root of two?"

"TO HOW MANY DECIMAL PLACES DO YOU WISH THE SQUARE ROOT OF TWO CALCULATED?"

"How about a hundred?"

"THE SQUARE ROOT OF TWO TO ONE HUNDRED DECIMAL PLACES IS DISPLAYED ON SCREEN A."

"Look at that, Harry! It didn't take it any time at all. One point four one four two one.... You think it's right?"

"Of course it's right. But we'll have Socrat check it for us. Watch this. Hey, Socrat, I want you to multiply the number on Screen A by itself."

"THE VALUE OF THE PRODUCT OF THE NUMBER ON SCREEN AND THE NUMBER ON SCREEN A IS DISPLAYED ON SCREEN B."

"There it is, Harry, a two followed by about a hundred zeroes. Hey, do you think Socrat could figure out the square root of two to a really big number of decimal places?"

"I'll ask it. Socrat, to how many decimal places can you find out the square root of two?"

"CALCULATIONS OF ROOTS OF NUMBERS ARE LIMITED ONLY BY THE MACHINE RESOURCES YOU WISH TO DEVOTE TO THE PROBLEM AND THE TIME YOU ARE WILLING TO WAIT FOR RESULTS."

"Okay, Socrat, how long would it take to get it to a million decimal places?"

"BY DEVOTING FULL CAPACITY OF THIS MACHINE TO THE TASK, IT COULD BE COMPLETED IN THIRTY-SEVEN SECONDS. WHERE DO YOU WISH YOUR OUTPUT PLACED?"

"Can I get it printed?"

"AFFIRMATIVE. PRINTOUT OF ONE MILLION DIGITS WILL REQUIRE SEVEN POINT SIX MINUTES. DO YOU WISH ME TO PERFORM THE CALCULATION?"

"What do you think, Spike?"

"Wait, Harry. Ask it how long it will take to get it to a hundred billion decimal places."

"A hundred billion?"

"Sure. I bet it can't do that."

"I bet it can. Socrat, how long will it take you to figure out the square root of two to a hundred billion places?"

"BY DEVOTING THE FULL CAPACITY OF THIS MACHINE TO THAT TASK, THE SQUARE ROOT OF TWO COULD BE CALCULATED TO TEN TO THE ELEVENTH DECIMAL PLACES IN APPROXIMATELY FORTY-THREE DAYS AND SEVEN HOURS. PRINTOUT OF THE RESULTS WOULD REQUIRE FIVE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-EIGHT DAYS."

"See, Harry, I knew it couldn't do it."

"Hold on, Spike. I haven't finished asking it. First of all, Socrat, what can you do with the output if you don't print it?"

"OUTPUT CAN BE STORED ON DISK MEMORY FOR RECALL TO SCREEN DISPLAY

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AS REQUIRED. REQUISITE DISK STORAGE IS NOT CURRENTLY AVAILABLE."

"I told you it couldn't do it."

"Just hang on, Spike. Socrat, is there anything you could erase from the disk storage to make room?"

"AS A PRIORITY-ONE USER YOU HAVE AUTHORIZATION TO ERASE ANY CURRENT FILES. STORAGE OF TEN TO THE ELEVENTH POWER DIGITS WILL REQUIRE APPROXIMATELY NINETY—THREE PERCENT OF ONLINE DISK PACK STORAGE AT THIS FACILITY. DO YOU WISH ME TO ERASE THIS STORAGE?"

"Not yet. We can't wait forty-three days to get the answer. Are there any other computers you can get to help with the job?"

"AS A PRIORITY-ONE USER YOU HAVE ACCESS TO ALL OTHER MACHINES ON THE NETWORK AND CAN EXECUTE AT PRIORITY ONE ON ALL SUCH MACHINES. THREE HUNDRED AND SIXTY-EIGHT MACHINES ARE CURRENTLY ON LINE."

"If we used all of them, how long would it take?"

"UTILIZATION OF THE FULL FACILITIES OF ALL MACHINES CURRENTLY ON LINE WOULD REDUCE CALCULATION TIME TO APPROXIMATELY SEVENTEEN HOURS AND TWELVE MINUTES."

"Hey, Harry, that's great. We could turn all the computers loose right now and then come back after school tomorrow and look at the answer."

"DO YOU WISH ME TO BEGIN PHASE-OVER OF OTHER NETWORK MACHINES TO YOUR TASK?"

"Go ahead, Harry. Tell it to start them up!"

"Just a second, Spike. I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"How come?"

"Look, if we erase all the disk files here and stop all those other computers so they can do our stuff, someone's going to notice. Besides, Socrat might be doing something important he shouldn't stop doing."

"I thought Socrat was talking to us."

"You dummy. Socrat can talk to us and do a hundred other things at the same time."

"Go on, Harry. You're kidding me."

"I'm not. I'll ask it what it's doing. Hey, Socrat, what important things are you doing right now?"

"I CANNOT INDEX ON THE WORD 'IMPORTANT.' JOBS ARE CATEGORIZED BY PRIORITY AND USER."

"Okay, give me a list of all the Priority-One jobs you're doing right now."

"LISTING OF PRIORITY-ONE JOBS IS DISPLAYED ON SCREEN A."

"Hey, look at that, Harry. That satellite catalog looks pretty interesting. Maybe we could print out a list of them?"

"Naw, Spike, you can get that stuff in a science book. Dad is always talking about his Land Use Planning Program. Let's mess around with that."

"What's it do?"

"Socrat, tell us about the Land Use Planning Program."

"THE LAND USE PLANNING PROGRAM AUTOMATES THE PROCESS OF DETERMINATION OF PRIORITIES FOR LAND USE FOR AGRICULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES. IT MATCHES REQUIREMENTS FOR FOOD PRODUCTS AGAINST AVAILABLE LAND. OUT-

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PUT IS PROVIDED TO FIFTY-SEVEN REGIONAL PLANNING CENTERS WHERE FARMERS CAN OBTAIN PERTINENT INFORMATION OF CROP REQUIREMENTS."

"You mean you tell the farmers how much stuff to grow?"

"USE OF PLANNING INFORMATION FOR CROP LAND ALLOCATION IS VOLUNTARY. PARTICIPATION BY FARMERS IN THE PROGRAM WAS SEVENTY-THREE PERCENT FOR THE LAST PLANNING YEAR."

"Spike, I got a great idea! What's your least favorite vegetable?"

"That's easy. Spinach."

"Mine too. Now what's your *favorite* vegetable."

"Peas, I guess. How come you want to know that?"

"My idea, stupid. We're going to have Socrat stop everyone from growing spinach and have them grow lots more peas."

"Wow, Harry, neat."

"Socrat, how much spinach is grown in the United States every year?"

"ONE HUNDRED AND NINETY-EIGHT THOUSAND SHORT TONS OF SPINACH WERE GROWN IN THE UNITED STATES DURING THE LAST PLANNING YEAR."

"Okay, can you set it so no more spinach is grown from now on?"

"NEGATIVE. CHANGES IN CROP ACREAGE ALLOCATION ARE LIMITED TO PLUS OR MINUS FIFTEEN PERCENT PER YEAR UNLESS A CONSENSUS OVERRIDE IS OBTAINED."

"Okay, then cut the allocation fifteen percent for each year for the next five years. And increase the allocation for peas by the same amount."

"YOUR REQUEST HAS BEEN ANALYZED. PREDICTED RETAIL PRICES OF SPINACH AND PEAS FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS ARE DISPLAYED ON SCREEN A. DO YOU WISH TO MODIFY THE MASTER PLANNING FILE?"

"Hey, Harry, look at that. In three years spinach will be twelve dollars a pound and peas will only cost twenty cents!"

"Socrat, please modify the files."

"THE MASTER PLANNING FILE HAS BEEN MODIFIED TO INCORPORATE YOUR REQUEST."

"Harry, look at the monitor! Isn't

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that your Dad coming out of his office?"

"Right! Quick, Spike, tear that paper out of the terminal. Socrat, log us off right away."

"SESSION ON ACCOUNT PEMBROKE HAS BEEN TERMINATED. IT HAS BEEN A PLEASURE TO SERVE YOU, PROFESSOR PEMBROKE."

"Here he comes, Harry."

"Hey, you kids aren't supposed to be in here."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I was just showing Spike the computer."

"You didn't touch anything did you?"

"I just tried to type some stuff on the terminal."

"I guess that couldn't have hurt anything. You see, this computer has built-in security checks. You know what those are, Spike?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Pembroke."

"Well, suppose someone wanted to get access to the computer to find out some important things that are stored inside or even to change around some of those things. He would have to know a logon name first and then he would have to know a secret password. And those passwords are changed every month. So not just anyone could come in here and use the computer. You understand that?"

"I guess so, Mr. Pembroke."

"Hey, Dad, can we come down and visit your office again next week?"

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"There you are, you naughties!"

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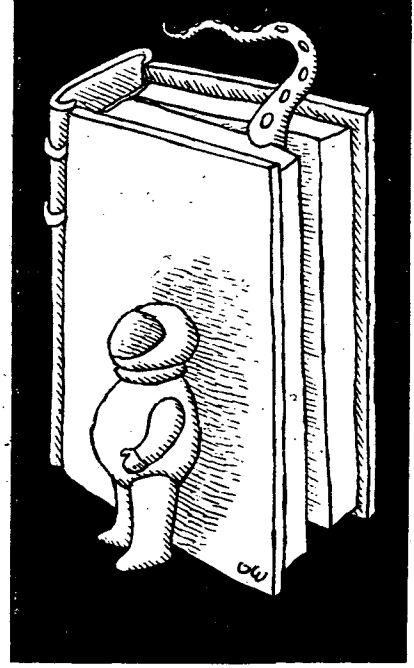
Books

THOMAS M. DISCH



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Jesus Tales, by Romulus Linney, North Point Press, (850 Talbot, Berkeley, Ca. 94706), $10.00

Valis, by Philip K. Dick, Bantam, $2.25

Scripts For The Pageant, by James Merrill, Atheneum, $12.95

White Light, by Rudy Rucker, Ace, $2.25, Virgin Books, London, UK £1.95

Their Immortal Hearts, (Stories by Bishop, Malzberg, and McAllister), West Coast Poetry Review, (1334 Dartmouth, Reno, Nev. 89509), $5.00 (paperback)

A week ago, as I first sat down to write this column, Jesus appeared to me in a burst of glory and said, "Wait a minute, Thomas. You've got a new assignment."

I was not a little taken aback, being unused to divine visitations. The occasional epiphany is about my limit — hints, portents, glows, tremblings — but never before a direct one-to-One communication.

After He'd dimmed His radiance enough for me to look at Him without blinking, I began rather defensively to explain the idea for the column I'd already begun. It was to have been about five books just on or well outside the border between sf and the mainstream, but all, nevertheless, possessing a distinct appeal to the sensibility of the Ideal Reader of the genre.

"Yes, I know what you intended," said Jesus, "and some other time you can write that column. But now I want you to write about *these* books." He reached under His robe and took out

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five books, which He placed on my desk. "You see," He said, with a look no reviewer could have resisted, "these are about Me."

"Oh," said I.

"So obviously," He went on, "they should take precedence over other books. The role I'm assigned varies in its meatiness from book to book, but that I should appear on-stage, as it were, in five so different works must be accounted a trend. And isn't that what reviewers are always trying to spot — trends?"

I looked at the spines of the books He'd given me and discovered they were the same books I'd already started to review. No miracle could have come more welcomely, for I'm a slow reader and my deadline was upon me.

"May I ask which of the five is Your favorite?"

He shook His head and smiled. "On the Day of Judgement I'll reveal who My favorites are — not till then."

"Then could You say something about the possible significance of the trend? Could it be a Sign that we're entering a new Age of Faith?"

"No, almost the contrary, I fear. It indicates, to Me, that all too many writers regard My gospels as little more than fabrications on a par with their own trashy novels, and regard Me as a character, like Santa Claus or Sherlock Holmes, no longer safeguarded by copyright laws and fallen into the public domain."

"It seems to me, Jesus, that You fell into the public domain when You were born."

"Very funny."

"Seriously. Have you read Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels?* Some of those Gnostic scrolls are as old as any of the synoptic gospels. The trend goes back two thousand years."

"Apocryphal tales!" He snorted. "Jokebooks!"

"But aren't jokes, in a sense, the primal form of Wisdom? Didn't You speak in parables by preference? For example. There's a story in here—" I opened Romulus Linney's *Jesus Tales.* "—in which You and St. Peter spend the night drinking with a couple of Basque hillbillies called Jacques and Jeannette. They fall to telling all sorts of wild tales, including some lulus about Jesus Himself, which He enjoys so much that when He leaves the next morning He performs a miracle for His hosts. He tells them, 'What this morning you first begin will not stop until tonight.'"

"And then what happens?" Jesus asked, pulling up a chair to the desk and helping Himself to coffee from the pot on the warmer.

"Well, Jeannette took in washing for a living, so she started in on that, and more and more clothes kept coming out of the tub, as though it were bottomless. But that isn't the end of the story. The rich farmers down in the valley get wind of what happened, and when Jesus and St. Peter are passing

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through their town five years later they put on a spectacular party for them, expecting to reap a similar reward. But instead — Here, let me read it from the book:

> The farmers hardly waited until Jesus and Saint Peter were off down the road before they all gathered around the richest farmer.
>
> "You all know what to do," he said. "Everybody has his purse. You start right now, counting money out of your purses. The money, like those clothes, will keep coming out, all day long. Everybody ready?"
>
> They all were. But the farmer stopped a minute, and thought.
>
> "Wait," he said. "We should all go into the woods and relieve ourselves first. That way we won't have to stop later, or waste any time counting money."

So the farmers take his advice — and you can guess how they spend the rest of the day."

Jesus guffawed.

It turned out that Jesus hadn't read Linney's book, so I went on to retell more of the *Jesus Tales*, and threw in a couple of jokes I'd just heard from my brother in Minnesota about Jesus and St. Peter golfing.

"Well, I hope the book as a whole is as good as that sample," said Jesus, in His mellowest humor.

"It's a delight. I intend to give it a rave review. And if You'd like to add a little testimonial of Your own...." I hinted.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly do that. This visit has to be unofficial. That's why I came to you. As a fiction writer, and an sf writer at that, people will assume, if you mention any of this, that you're just making it up. Or—" He smiled slyly. "—that you've gone off your rocker. Like our friend here—" He tapped His finger on the cover of *Valis*. "Mr. Philip K. Dick."

"Not to change the subject, but do You know the poem by Jacapone da Todi called (I can't remember the Italian) 'It Is the Highest Wisdom To Be Considered Crazy for the Love of Christ'?"

Jesus nodded, and quoted the first line in a rich Tuscan accent: "*Seno me pare e cortesia, empazir per lo bel Messia.*" Then, for my benefit, He translated: "It's plain good sense and common courtesy to drive yourself crazy for Christ's dear sake."

"Thus spake da Todi, and likewise William Blake," I put in, unable to resist an easy rhyme. "I mentioned that poem because it seems to me that Dick is carrying on in that tradition. Also, like da Todi, and like Blake too, he's aware of the paradoxes involved. He knows he sounds nuts, and the situation fascinates him. There's a passage I underlined on page 26; let me read it to You:

> ...You cannot say that an encounter with God is to mental illness what death is to cancer: the logical outcome of a deteriorating illness process. The technical term — theological technical term, not psy-

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chiatric — is theophany. A theophany consists of a self-disclosure by the divine. It does not consist of *something the percipient does; it* consists of something the divine — the God or gods, the high power — does..."

At that point Dick goes on to speculate how to distinguish between a genuine theophany and a hallucination. And of course there is no certain way to distinguish, unless God discloses some information that one couldn't possibly know by any other means. Which is rarely, if ever, the case."

Jesus nodded. "Yes, that's the basic theory We have to work on. What would become of human freedom if everyone knew for a fact that heaven is always, as it were, on patrol? The Age of Miracles is over."

"Except in novels. In novels (as in the Scriptures) miracles are easy to arrange. But the peculiar fascination of *Valis* is that for much of its length it's not exactly a novel. Dick did have his own honest-to-God theophany back in 1974, and on the one occasion I met him, some time afterward, he gave me an account of that experience that follows the 'plot' of *Valis* fairly closely."

"And did you believe him?" Jesus asked.

"I believed that *he* believed that he'd been in touch with something supernatural. Indeed, I was a bit envious, having never had a theophany of my own. Until," I thought to add, "this afternoon."

Jesus smiled enigmatically.

"I hope Dick won't think I'm betraying his confidence mentioning that. He's discussed the same experience in his interview in Charles Platt's *Dream Makers*, and in *Valis* itself the hero is called 'Philip K. Dick,' though he also appears in the form of an alter ego called 'Horselover Fat' (which is his own name, rendered from Greek and German). The fascination of the book, what's most artful *and* confounding about it, is the way the line between Dick and Fat shifts and wavers, Dick representing the professional novelist who understands that all these mystic revelations are his own novelistic imaginings, while Fat is the part of him that receives, for a while, and believes, a little longer, messages from ... You, Lord."

"Oh, I'm not the half of it in *Valis*. Wagner, Ikhnaton, UFOs, the Roman Empire, Richard Nixon — they all are conflated into one thick Jungian stew. When I do appear in person, so to speak, I've been transmogrified into a two-year-old girl."

"Mm, that was a good scene."

"And the book as a whole? Do you honestly think Dick has made a *novel* of that mish-mash of theology and psuedo-science? You, the esthete, the skeptic, the Doubting Thomas!"

"I'll admit that as a novel, as a *whole* novel, I thought it went off the rails sometimes. But the first half holds together wonderfully, considering how much there is to be held together. If

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you read it as a realistic, confessional novel, in the sad-mad-glad vein of Plath's *The Bell Jar* or (better) Persig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Valis* scores, oh let's say 8.416 on a scale of 10. Even its wilder flights of fancy fall into place, not as a system of belief to be considered on its merits, but as components of the self being confessed. Dick has always had the most hyperkinetic imagination in science fiction. His plots have often played elaborate games with the mechanics of suspended disbelief. In those ways *Valis* is the next logical esthetic step. Where it went wrong, for me, is when Dick, Fat, and their friends go off to see a movie called *Valis*. *Valis*-the-movie is a bore, and it is also, significantly, the moment when the book shifts from a confessional, psychological mode into sf. That is, the world of the novel ceases to be the world of everyday common consensus and begins to conform to Horselover Fat's imaginings. Suddenly the dialectic tightrope goes slack, and Dick almost falls into the net. But not quite. In fact, his recovery is masterful."

"From your description of *Valis*, Thomas, I don't think its own author would recognize it. *I* think Mr. Dick is more than half-persuaded that his syncretistic ruminations — that long Appendix he calls *Tractates Cryptica Scriptura* — are the God's truth. I think, in short, that he's a heretic!"

"And James Merrill?"

"Another heretic."

"*Scripts for the Pageant* is the last book in a trilogy, as You know. Have you read the two preceding, *Divine Comedies* and *Mirabell*?"

"To be perfectly frank, Thomas, I don't have the patience for most poetry. A little Milton, long ago, and some Dante before that. Merrill's book seems to aim at enlightenment more than entertainment, and being a major source of enlightenment Myself...."

"You're not alone in feeling that way, but I don't think it's a valid antithesis. Why can't Truth be amusing? Think of Castaneda, or Persig, or *Valis*, for that matter. If novels can aspire to the condition of Holy Writ (and still be fun), why not poetry?"

"In theory I agree. But modern poetry has become so abstract. Dante, by contrast, was first and foremost a marvelous story-teller."

"And so is Merrill, though the story he tells is admittedly rather sedentary. Merrill and his friend, David Jackson, receive messages on a ouija board from an otherworldly figure called Ephraim, who puts them in touch with the elemental spirits and with many of their own lately deceased friends and culture heroes. It's like Dante without the geography, but *with* all the great cameo performances."

"Including a libelous twelve-line role for Yours Truly."

"You don't figure very largely in Merrill's scheme of the afterlife, that's so, but in a pluralistic society and a secular age...."

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"I should be happy to receive so much as a footnote? Mohammed, by contrast, rates a full scene of his own, and his verses are much more vividly written. What's more, he's introduced, by the Master of Ceremonies, as 'the one still very much alive force in that crowd.' The crowd namely, of Buddha, Myself, Mohammed, and Mercury. Do you really think Christianity deserves being relegated to the status of Roman mythology?"

"Of course not, Jesus. Merrill is referring only to the *demographic* strength of Islam, to the fanatic loyalty it can still command. I do think this is a side-issue. Poets are entitled to some poetic license, and—"

"We'll see what Merrill is entitled to on the Day of Judgement, shall we? (And it won't be another Pulitzer or NBA, I can assure you!) Meanwhile, tell me this — do you think *science fiction readers* will want to read three volumes of ouija messages in heroic couplets?"

"Not *all* sf readers, no. But those who aren't shy of a bit of intellectual exercise can enjoy his poem in exactly the way they'd enjoy Dick — as an imaginative experience of the first order. 'Enjoy' is such a tame word for it, though. The trilogy as a whole may well be the finest large-scale poem any American has ever written — lots of knowledgable critics are already saying so — and it's certainly more polished, more integrated, and just plain more fun than any of the contenders. *The Cantos*, say, or *Paterson*. But its specific appeal for sf readers is the way Merrill turns the dry straw of science textbooks into poetry of pure spun gold. Everyone is always saying that that's what modern poetry *should* be doing, but most poets today are scientific illiterates. Merrill is—"

"The Messiah, by the sound of it!"

"We're never going to agree about this, Jesus. Tell me, what did you think of *White Light*?"

"From a strictly Christian point of view, it seemed the least libelous. I'm represented quite orthodoxly as contesting with Satan for the soul of a departed spirit. That scene, however, is almost the only part of the book that offers a traditional view of the afterlife. Most of the action takes place in a kind of non-Euclidean Heaven called Cimön, where everything, even single blades of grass, is infinite. Being infinite Myself in many ways, I can appreciate the difficulty of the task Mr. Rucker set himself. By and large I thought he carried it off rather well."

"That sounds almost like a Judgement to me."

Jesus smiled. "Well, after all, it's only a story, so I feel I can be charitable. *White Light* doesn't make any claims, as Dick's book does, or Merrill's, on a reader's literal Faith. Besides, I like a story with an orderly plot and characters who get their just deserts. Call Me old-fashioned, but I thought it was a damned good read. You can quote Me if you like."

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"Mm. I don't know if Rucker — or, indeed, most readers — would consider *White Light* 'old-fashioned.' There haven't been many sf novels that use pure mathematics as the basis for constructing an alien world. *Flatland*, a couple short stories by Norman Kagan, and ... what else? and the *tone* of the book is as singular as its conceptual framework, a sort of cross between Raymond Chandler and Lewis Carrol (another mathematicizing fabulist) with a tip of the hat along the way to Franz Kafka, who appears, in beetle form, as Virgil to the narrator's Dante. Old-fashioned?"

"Your perspective on Time naturally differs from Mine. I think too much is made of whether things are new or old. Good and bad, intelligent and dumb, powerful and weak — those are surely more relevant standards of Judgement than mere novelty and timeliness."

"I'd have to agree, and I'd add that *White Light* is a good, intelligent, powerful novel, and the most auspicious debut in the sf field since.... Well, considering it's his first novel, since I don't know when."

"I hope you won't, when you review it," said Jesus, "give away too much of the plot. There's a special circle in hell for reviewers who spoil a story's best surprises. And with that word to the wise, I'd really best be on My way. This has been an awfully long theophany."

"Wait, wait — there's one more."

I took out *Their Immortal Hearts* from the bottom of the pile. It was an anthology in three parts: *Cold War Orphans*, a novelette by Michael Bishop; the title novella of 80 pages by Bruce McAllister (who is also the book's publisher); a novella of 40 pages by Barry Malzberg, *"Le Croix."* It is the Malzberg story that includes Jesus among its dramatis personae. Of the five treatments of Christ, Malzberg's is in some ways the most reverent — or, at least, the most anguished — but also the most skeptical. Like Ingmar Bergman, like Graham Greene, like a lot of us, Malzberg seems hungry for his own theophany, and yet one can't escape the feeling that even if God spoke to him directly from a burning bush he'd immediately suspect someone else of having set the fire. I was anxious, therefore, to know Jesus's opinion of so representative a modern instance.

Jesus riffled the pages of *Their Immortal Hearts*. "Oh yes. Mm-hm. Well." He closed the book with a sigh. "The Bishop story was rather strong, I thought. Who would expect a writer his age to capture so vividly the atmosphere of an Air Force base in Turkey in the 1950's? I wouldn't call it sf, but there's no sin in that. As for the McAllister novella, dear Me, what can I say? I thought it was dull, and certainly much too long. Writers who need editors shouldn't publish their own work. But I daresay many sf readers will enjoy it more than any of the

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other books we've been speaking of. Doesn't it say somewhere in the Bible, 'If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all'?"

"No, that's from *Bambi*."

"It's still a good maxim."

"Jesus," I insisted, even as He started to fade away, "what did you think of Barry Malzberg's story?"

"Oh yes, *'Le Croix.'*" His voice faded to a whisper, thence to a hallowed silence. I thought I could see tears forming in His eyes. Just before He disappeared altogether He took a pencil from the breast pocket of His robe, flipped open James Merrill's *Scripts for the Pageant*, and drew a line beside the following passage. (I still have the copy He marked for anyone who may doubt the veridical truth of this narrative.)

This is the passage Jesus scored:

But, after all, we bookish people
live
In bondage to those reigning narrative
Conventions whereby the past two or three
Hundred years have seen a superhuman
All-shaping Father dwindle (as in Newman)
To ghostly, disputable Essence, or
Some shaggy-browed, morality-play bore
(As in the Prologue to *Faust*). Today the line
Drawn in esthetic. One allows divine
Discourse, if at all, in paraphrase.
Why should God speak? How humdrum what he *says*
Next to His works: out of a black sleeve, lo!
Sun, Earth and Stars in eloquent dumb show.
Our human words are weakest, I would urge,
When He resorts to them. Here on the verge
Of these objections, one does well to keep
One's mouth shut—

Coming next month

Featured next month is a new novella from Michael Shea, who wrote "The Autopsy," (December 1980) and "The Angel of Death," (August 1979). The new story is titled "Polypheums." It is a fine sf thriller in which Mr. Shea brings his distinctive talents to the description of a planet called Firebairn and one of the most fearsome aliens we've ever come across. The August issue is on sale July 2.

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George Guthridge ("The Exiled, the Hunted," June 1977; "Oregon," April 1979) returns with a remarkably original and moving tale about a program to protect endangered peoples...

The Quiet

BY

GEORGE FLORANCE-GUTHRIDGE

Kuara, my son, the Whites have stolen the moon.

Outside the window the sky is black. A blue-white disc hangs among the stars. It is Earth, says Doctor Stefanko. I wail and beat my fists. Straps bind me to a bed. Doctor Stefanko forces my shoulders down, swabs my arm. "Since you can't keep still, I'm going to have to put you under again," she says, smiling. I lie quietly.

It is not Earth. Earth is brown. Earth is Kalahari.

"You are on the moon," Doctor Stefanko says. It is the second or third time she has told me; I have awakened and slept, awakened and slept until I am not sure what voices are dream and what are real, if any. Something pricks my skin. "Rest now. You have had a long sleep."

I remember awakening the first time. The white room, white cloth covering me. Outside, blackness and the blue-white disc.

"On the moon," I say. My limbs feel heavy. My head spins. Sleep drags at my flesh. "The moon."

"Isn't it wonderful?"

"And you say my husband, Tuka — dead."

Her lips tighten. She looks at me solemnly. "He did not survive the sleep."

"The moon is hollow," I tell her. "Everyone knows that. The dead sleep there." I stare at the ceiling. "I am alive and on the moon. Tuka is dead but is not here." The words seem to float from my mouth. There are little dots on the ceiling.

"Sleep now. That's a girl. We'll talk more later."

"And Kuara. My son. Alive." The dots are spinning. I close my eyes. The

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dots keep spinning.

'Yes, but...."

"About a hundred years ago a law was formulated to protect endangered species — animals which, unless humankind was careful, might become extinct," Doctor Stefanko says. Her face is no longer blurry. She has gray hair, drawn cheeks. I have seen her somewhere — long before I was brought to this place. I cannot remember where. The memory slips away.

Gai, wearing a breechclout, stands grinning near the window. The disc Doctor Stefanko calls Earth haloes his head. His huge, pitted tongue sticks out where his front teeth are missing. His shoulders slope like those of a hartebeest. His chest, leathery and wrinkled, is tufted with hair beginning to gray. I am not surprised to see him, after his treachery. He makes num pulse in the pit of my belly. I look away.

"Then the law was broadened to include endangered peoples. Peoples like the Gwi." Doctor Stefanko smiles maternally and presses her index finger against my nose. I toss my head. She frowns. "Obviously, it would be impossible to save entire tribes. So the founders of the law did what they thought best. They saved certain representatives. You. Your family. A few others, such as Gai. These representatives were frozen."

"Frozen?"

"Made cold."

"As during gum, when ice forms inside the ostrich-egg containers?"

"Much colder."

It was not dream, then. I remember staring through a blue, crinkled sheen. Like light seen through a snakeskin. I could not move, though my insides never stopped shivering. *So this is death*, I kept thinking.

"In the interim you were brought here to the moon. To Carnival. It is a fine place. A truly international facility; built as a testament to the harmony of nations. Here we have tried to recreate the best of what used to be." She pauses, and her eyes grow keen. "This will be your home now, U," she says.

"And Kuara?"

"He will live here with you, in time." Something in her voice makes fear touch me. Then she says, "Would you like to see him?" Some of the fear slides away.

"Is it wise, Doctor?" Gai asks. "She has a temper, this one." His eyes grin down at me. He stares at my pelvis.

"Oh, we'll manage. You'll be a good girl, won't you, U?"

My head nods. My heart does not say yes or no.

The straps leap away with a loud click. Doctor Stefanko and Gai help me to my feet. The world wobbles. The Earth-disc tilts and swings. The floor slants one way, another way. Needles tingle in my feet and hands. I am helped into a chair. More clicking. The door hisses open and the chair

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floats out, Doctor Stefanko leading, Gai lumbering behind. We move down one corridor after another. This is a place of angles. No curves, except the smiles of Whites as we pass. And they curve too much.

Another door hisses. We enter a room full of chill. Blue glass, the inside laced with frost, stretches from floor to ceiling along each wall. Frozen figures stand behind the glass. I remember this place. I remember how slugglish was the hate in my heart.

"Kuara is on the end," Doctor Stefanko says, her breath white.

The chair floats closer. My legs bump the glass; cold shocks my knees. The chair draws back. I lean forward. Through the glass I can see the closed eyes of my son. Ice furs his lashes and brows. His head is tilted to one side. His little arms dangle. I touch the glass in spite of the cold. I hear Gai's sharp intake of breath and he draws back my shoulders, but Doctor Stefanko puts a hand on Gai's wrist and I am released. There is give to the glass. Not like that on the trucks in the tsama patch. My num rises. My heart beats faster. Num enters my arms, floods my fingers. "Kuara," I whisper. Warmth spreads upon the glass. It makes a small, ragged circle.

"He'll be taken from here as soon as you've settled into your new home," Doctor Stefanko says.

Kuara. If only I could dance. Num would boil within me. I could kia. I would shoo away the ghosts of the cold. Awakening, you would step through the glass and into my arms.

Though we often lacked water we were not unhappy. The tsama melons supported us. It was a large patch, and by conserving we could last long periods without journeying to the waterholes. Whites and tame Bushmen had taken over the Gam and Gautscha Pans, and the people there, the Kung, either had run away or had stayed for the water and now worked the Whites' farms and ate mealie meal.

There were eleven of us, though sometimes one or two more. Gai, unmated, was one of those who came and went. Tuka would say, "You can always count us on three hands, but never on two or four hands." He would laugh, then. He was always laughing. I think he laughed because there was so little game near the Akam Pan, our home. The few duiker and steenbok that had once roamed our plain had smelled the coming of the Whites and the fleeing Kung, and had run away. Tuka laughed to fill up the empty spaces.

Sometimes, when he wasn't trapping springhare and porcupine, he helped me gather wood and tubers. We dug xwa roots and koa, the water root buried deep in the earth, until our arms ached. Sometimes we hit the na trees with sticks, making the sweet berries fall, and Tuka would chase me round and round, laughing and yelling like a

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madman. It was times like those when I wondered why I had once hated him so much.

I wondered much about that during kuma, a hot season when starvation stalked us. During the day I would take off my kaross, dig a shallow pit within what little shade a orogu bush offered, then urinate in the sand, cover myself with more sand and place a leaf over my head. The three of us — Tuka, Kuara, and I — lay side by side like dead people. "My heart is sad from hunger," I sang to myself all day. "Like an old man, sick and slow." I thought of the bad things, then. My parents marrying me to Tuka before I was ready because, paying bride service, he brought my mother a new kaross. Tuka doing the marrying thing to me before I was ready. Everything before I was ready! Sometimes I prayed into the leaf that a paouw would fly down and think his penis a fat caterpillar.

Then one night Tuka snared a honey badger. A badger, during kuma! Everyone was excited. Tuka said, "Yesterday, when we slept, I told the land that my U was hungry, and I must have meat for her and Kuara." The badger was very tender. Gai ate his share and went begging, though he had never brought meat to the camp. When the meat was gone we roasted ga roots and sang and danced while Tuka played the gwashi. I danced proudly. Not for Tuka but for myself. Num uncurled from the pit of my belly and came boiling up my spine. I was afraid, because when num reaches my skull I kia. Then I see ghosts killing people, and I smell the rotting smell of death, like decaying carcasses.

Tuka took my head in his hands. "You must not kia," he said. "Not now. Your body will suffer too much for the visions." For other people, kia brings healing — of self, of others; for me it only brings pain.

Tuka held me beside the fire and stroked me, and num subsided. "When I lie in the sand during the day, I dream I have climbed the footpegs in a great baobab tree," he said. "I look out from the treetop, and the land is agraze with animals. Giraffe and wildebeest and kudu. 'You must kill these beasts and bring them to U and Kuara before the Whites kill them,' my dream says."

Then he asked, "What do you think of when you lie there, U?"

I did not answer. I was afraid to tell him; I did not want him to feel angry or sad after his joy from catching the honey badger. He smiled. His eyes, moist, shone with firelight. Perhaps he thought num had stopped my tongue.

The next day the quiet came. Lying beneath the sand, I felt num pulse in my belly. I fought the fear it always brought. I did not cry out to Tuka. The pulsing increased. I began to tremble. Sweat ran down my face. Num boiled within me. It entered my spine and pushed toward my throat. My eyes were wide and I kept staring at the veins of the leaf but seeing dread. I felt myself going rigid and shivering at the

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same time. My head throbbed; it was as large as a ga root. I could hear my mouth make sputtery noises, like Kuara used to at my breast. The pressure inside me kept building, building.

And suddenly was gone. It burrowed into the earth, taking my daydreams with it. I went down and down into the sand. I passed ubbee roots and animals long dead, their bones bleached and forgotten. I came to a waterhole far beneath the ground. Tuka was in the water. Kuara was too. He looked younger, barely old enough to toddle. Tuka, smiling, looked handsome. *He is not a bad person,* I told myself; *he just wants his way too much. But he has brought meat to our people, I cannot forget that. And some day perhaps he will bring me a new kaross. Perhaps he will bring many things. Important things.*

I took off my kaross, and the three of us held hands and danced, naked, splashing. There was no num to seize me. No marrying-thing urge to seize Tuka. Only quiet, and laughter.

"This will be your new home, U," Doctor Stefanko says as she opens a door. She has given me a new kaross; of *geniune* gemsbok, she tells me, though I am uncertain why she speaks of it that way. When she puts her hand on my back and pushes me forward, the kaross feels soft and smooth against my skin. "We think you'll like it, and if there's anything you need...."

I grab the sides of the door and turn my face away. I will not live in nor even look at the place. But her push becomes firmer, and I stumble inside. I cover my face with my hands.

"There, now," Doctor Stefanko says. I spy through my fingers.

We are in Kalahari.

I turn slowly, for suddenly my heart is shining and singing. No door. No walls. No angles. The sandveld spreads out beneath a cloudless sky. Endless pale-gold grass surrounds scattered white-thorn and tsi; in the distance lift several flat-topped acacias and even a mongongo tree. A dassie darts in and out of a rocky kranze.

"Here might be a good place for you tshushi — your shelter," Doctor Stefanko says, pulling me forward. She enters the tall grass, bends, comes up smiling, holding branches in one hand, gui fibers in the other. "You see? We've even cut some of the materials you'll need."

"But how—"

"The moon isn't such a horrible place, now is it." She strides back through the grass. "And we here at Carnival are dedicated to making your stay as pleasant as possible. Just look here." She moves a rock. A row of buttons gleams. "Turn this knob, and you can control your weather; no more suffering through those terrible hot and cold seasons. Unless you want to, of course," she adds quickly. "And from time to time some nice people will be looking down ... *in* on you. From up there, within the sky." She makes a

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sweep of her arm. "They want to watch how you live; you — and others like you — are quite a sensation, you know." I stare at her without understanding. "Anyway, if you want to see them, just turn this knob. And if you want to hear what the monitor's saying about you, turn this one."She looks up, sees my confusion. "Oh, don't worry; the monitor translates everything. It's a wonderful device."

Standing, she takes hold of my arms. Her eyes almost seem warm. "You see, U, there is no more Kalahari on Earth — not as you knew it anyhow — so we created another. In some ways it won't be as good as what you were used to, in a lot of ways it'll be better." Her smile comes back. "We think you'll like it."

"And Kuara?"

"He's waking now. He'll join you soon." She takes hold of my hands. "Soon." Then she walks back in the direction we came, quickly fading in the distance. Suddenly she is gone. A veil of heat shimmers above the grass where the door seemed to have been. For a moment I think of following. Finally I shrug. I work at building my tshushi. I work slowly, methodically, my head full of thoughts. I think of Kuara, and something gnaws at me. I drop the fiber I am holding and begin walking toward the opposite horizon, where a giraffe is eating from the mongongo tree.

Grasshoppers, kxon ants, dung beetles hop and crawl among the grasses. Leguaan scuttle. A mole snake slithers for a hole beneath a uri bush. I walk quickly, the sand warm but not hot beneath my feet. The plain is sun-drenched, the few small omirimbi water courses parched and cracked, yet I feel little thirst. A steenbok leaps for cover behind a white-thorn. This is a good place, part of me decides. Here will Kuara become the hunter Tuka could not be. Kuara will never laugh to shut out sadness.

The horizon draws no closer.

I measure the giraffe with my thumb, walk a thousand paces, remeasure, walk another thousand paces, remeasure.

The giraffe does not change size.

I will walk another thousand. Then I will turn back and finish the tshushi.

A hundred paces further I bump something hard.

A wall.

Beyond, the giraffe continues feeding.

The Whites with the Land Rovers came during ga, the hottest season. The trucks bucked and roared across the sand. Tuka took Kuara and hurried to meet them. I went too, though I walked behind with the other women. There were several white men and some Bantu. Gai was standing in the lead truck, waving and grinning.

A white, blond-haired woman climbed out. She was wearing white shorts and a light brown shirt with

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rolled-up sleeves. I recognized her immediately. Doctor Morse, come to study us again. Tuka had said the Whites did not wonder about their own culture, so they liked to study ours.

She talked to us women a long time, asking about our families and how we felt about SWAPO, the People's Army. Everyone spoke at once. She kept waving her hands for quiet. "What do you think, U?" she would ask. "What's your opinion?" I said she should ask Tuka; he was a man and understood such things. Doctor frowned, so I said SWAPO should not kill people. SWAPO should leave people alone. Doctor Morse wrote in her notebook as I talked. I was pleased. The other women were very jealous.

Doctor Morse told us the war in South Africa was going badly; soon it would sweep this way. When Tuka finished looking at the engines I asked him what Doctor Morse meant by "badly." Badly for Blacks, or Whites. Badly for those in the south, or those of us in the Kalahari. He did not know. None of us asked Doctor Morse.

Then she said, "We have brought water. Lots of water. We've heard you've been without." Her hair caught the sunlight. She was very beautiful for a white woman.

We smiled but refused her offer. She frowned but did not seem angry. Maybe she thought it was because she was white. If so, she was wrong; accept gifts, and we might forget the ones Kalahari gives us. "Well, at least go for a ride in the trucks." she said, beaming. Tuka laughed and, taking Kuara by the hand, scrambled for the two Land Rovers. I shook my head. "You really should go," Doctor Morse said. "It'll be good for you."

"That is something for men to do," I told her. "Women do not understand those things."

"All they're going to do is ride in the back!"

"Trucks. Hunting. Fire. Those are men's things," I said.

Only one of the trucks came back. Everyone but Tuka, Kuara, and some of the Bantu returned. "The truck's stuck in the sand; the Whites decided to wait until dawn to pull it out," Gai said. "Tuka said he'd sleep beside it. You know how he is about trucks!" Everyone laughed. Except me. An empty space throbbed in my heart; that I wanted him home angered me.

Then rain came. It was ga go — male rain. It poured down strong and sudden, not even and gentle, the female rain that fills the land with water. Rain, during ga! Everyone shouted and danced for joy. Even the Whites danced. A miracle! people said. I thought about the honey badger caught during kuma, and was afraid. I felt alone. In spite of my fear, perhaps because of it, I did a foolish thing. I slept away from the others.

In the night the quiet again touched me. Num uncurled in my belly. I did not beckon it forth. I swear I didn't. I

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wasn't even thinking about it. As I slept I felt my body clench tight. In my dreams I could hear my breathing — shallow and rapid. Fear seized me and shook me like the twig of a ni ni bush. I sank into the earth. Tuka and Kuara were standing slump-shouldered in steaming, ankle-deep water at the waterhole where we had danced. Kuara was wearing the head of a wildebeest; the eyes had been carved out and replaced with smoldering coals. "Run away, mother," he kept saying.

I awoke to shadows. A fleeting darkness came upon me before I could move. I glimpsed Gai grinning beneath the moon. Then a hand was clapped over my mouth.

Doctor Stefanko returns after I've finished the hut. She and Gai bring warthog and kudu hides, porcupine quills, tortoise shells, ostrich eggs, a sharpening stone, an awl, two assagai blades, pots of Bantu clay. Many things. Gai grins as he sets them down. Doctor Stefanko watches him. "Back on Earth, he might not have remained a bachelor if your people hadn't kept thinking of him as one," she tells me as he walks away. Then she also leaves.

Later, she brings Kuara.

He comes sprinting, gangly, the grass nearly to his chin. "Mama," he shouts, "mama, mama," and I take him in my arms, whirling and laughing. I put my hands upon his cheeks; his arms are around my waist. Real. Oh, yes. So very real, my Kuara! Tears roll down my face. He looks hollow-eyed, and his hair has been shaved. But I do not let concern stop my heart. I weep from joy, not pain.

Doctor Stefanko leaves, and Kuara and I talk. He babbles about a strange sleep, and Doctor Stefanko, and Gai, as I show him the camp. We play with the knobs Doctor Stefanko showed me; one of them makes a line of small windows blink on in the slight angle between wall-sky and ceiling-sky. The windows look like square beads. There, faces pause and peer. Children. Old men. Women with smiles like springhares. People of many races. I tell him not to smile or acknowledge their presence. Not even that of the children. Expecially not the children. The faces are surely ghosts, I warn. Ghosts dreaming of becoming Gwi.

We listen to the voice Doctor Stefanko calls the monitor. It is sing-song, lulling. A woman's voice, I think. "U and Kuara, the latest additions to Carnival, members of the last Gwi tribal group, will soon become accustomed to our excellent accommodations," the voice says. The voice floats with us as we go to gather roots and wood.

A leguaan pokes its head from the rocky kranze, listening. Silently I put down my wood. Then my hand moves slowly. So slowly it is almost not movement. I grab. Caught! Kuara shrieks and claps his hands. Notice the scarification across the cheeks and upper legs," the voice is saying. "The

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same is true of the buttocks, though like any self-respecting Gwi, U will not remove her kaross in the presence of others except during the Eland Dance." I carry the leguaan wiggling to the hut. "Were she to disrobe, you would notice tremendous fatty desposits in the buttocks, a phenomenon known as steatopygia. Unique to Bushmen (or 'Bushwomen,' we should say), this anatomical feature aids in food storage. It was once believed that...."

After breaking the leguaan's neck, I take off the kaross of geniune gemsbok and, using gui fiber, tie it in front of my hut. It makes a wonderful door. I have never had a door. Tuka and I slept outside, using the tshushi for storage. Kuara will have a door. A door between him and the watchers.

He will have fire. Fire for warmth and food and U to sing beside. I gather kane and ore sticks and carve male and female, then use galli grass for tinder. Like Tuka did. "The Gwi are marked by a low, flattened skull, tiny mastoid processes, a bulging or vertical forehead, peppercorn hair, a nonpragnathous face...." I twirl the sticks between my palms. It seems to take forever. My arms grow sore. I am ready to give up when smoke suddenly curls. Gibbering, Kuara leaps about the camp. I gaze at the fire and grin with delight. But it is frightened delight. I will make warmth fires and food fires, I decide as I blow the smoke into flame. Not ritual fires. Not without Tuka.

I roast the leguaan with eru berries and the tsha-cucumber, which seems plentiful. But I am not Tuka, quick with fire and laughter; the fire-making has taken too long. Halfway through the cooking, Kuara seizes the lizard and, bouncing it in his hands as though it were hot dough, tears it apart. "Kuara!" I blurt out in pretended anger. He giggles as, the intestines dangling, he holds up the lizard to eat. I smile sadly. Kuara's laughing eyes and ostrich legs ... so much like Tuka!

"The Gwi sing no praises of battles or warriors," the voice sing-says. I help Kuara finish the leguaan. "They have no history of warfare; ironically, it was last century's South African War, in which the Gwi did not take part, that assured their extinction. Petty arguments are common (even a nonviolent society cannot keep husbands and wives from scrapping), but fighting is considered dishonorable. To fight is to have failed to...." When I gaze up there are no faces in the windows.

At last, dusk dapples the grass. Kuara finds a guinea-fowl feather and a reed; leaning against my legs, he busies himself making a zani. The temperature begins to drop. I decide the door would fit better around our shoulders than across the tshushi.

A figure strides out of the setting sun. I shield my eyes with my arm. Doctor Stefanko. She smiles and nods at Kuara, now tying a nut onto his toy for a weight, and sits on a log. Her smile remains, though it is drained of

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joy. She looks at me seriously.

"I do hope Kuara's presence will dissuade you from any more *displays* such as you exhibited this afternoon," she tells me. "Surely you must realize that he is here with you on a ....a trial basis, shall we say. If you create problems, we'll have to take the boy back to the prep rooms until ... until you become more accustomed to your surroundings." She taps her forefinger against her palm. "This impetuousness of yours has got to cease." Another tap. "And cease now."

Head cocked, I gaze at her, not understanding.

"Taking off your kaross simply because the monitor said you do not." She nods knowingly. "Oh, yes, we're aware when you're listening. And that frightful display with the lizard!" She makes a face and appears to shudder. "Then there's the matter of the fire." She points toward the embers. "You're supposed to be living here like you did back on Earth. At least during the day. Men *always* started the fires."

"Men were always present." I shrug.

"Yes. Well, arrangements are being made. For the time being stick to foods you don't need to cook. And use the heating system." She goes to the rock and, on hands and knees, turns one of the knobs. A humming sounds. Smiling and rubbing her hands over the fire, she reseats herself on the log, pulls a photograph from her hip pocket and hands it to me. I turn the picture right-side-up. Doctor Morse is standing with her arm across Gai's shoulders. His left arm is around her waist. The Land Rovers are in the background.

"Impetuous," Doctor Stefanko says, leaning over and clicking her fingernail against the photograph. "That's exactly what Doctor Morse wrote about you in her notebooks. *She* considered it a virtue." Again the eyebrow lifts. "We do not." Then she adds proudly, "She was my grandmother, you know. As you can imagine, I have more than simply a professional interest in our Southwest African section here at Carnival."

I start to hand back the photograph. She raises her hand, halting me. "Keep it," she says. "Think of it as a wedding present. The first of many."

That night, wrapped in the kaross, Kuara and I sleep in one another's arms, in the tshushi. He is still clutching the zani, though he has not thrown it once into the air to watch it spin down. Perhaps he will tomorrow. Tomorrow. An ugly word. I lie staring at the dark ground, sand clenched in my fists. I wonder if, somehow using devices to see in the dark, the ghosts in the sky-windows are watching me sleep. I wonder if they will watch the night Gai climbs upon my back and grunts throughout the marrying-thing.

Sleep comes. A tortured sleep. I can feel myself hugging Kuara. He squirms against the embrace but does not

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awaken. In my dreams I slide out of myself and, stirring up the fire, dance the Eland Dance. My body is slick with eland fat. My eyes stare rigidly into the darkness and my head is held high and stiff. Chanting, I lift and put down my feet, moving around and around the fire. Other women clap and sing the kia-healing songs. Men play the gwashi and musical bows. The music lifts and lilts and throbs. Rhythm thrums within me. Each muscle knows the song. Tears squeeze from my eyes. Pain leadens my legs. And still I dance.

Then, at last, num rises. It uncurls in my belly and breathes fire-breath up my spine. I fight the fear. I dance against the dread. I tremble with fire. My eyes slit with agony. I do not watch the women clapping and singing. My breaths come in shallow, heated gasps. My breasts bounce. I dance. Num continues to rise. It tingles against the base of my brain. It fills my head. My entire body is alive, burning. Thorns are sticking everywhere in my flesh. My breasts are fiery coals. I can feel ghosts, hot ghosts, ghosts of the past, crowding into my skull. I stagger for the hut; Kuara and U, my old self, await me. I slide into her flesh like someone slipping beneath the cool, mud-slicked waters of a year-round pan. I slide in among her fear and sorrow and the anguished joy of Kuara beside her.

She stirs. A movement of a sleeping head. A small groan; denial. I slide in further. I become her once again. My head is aflame with num and ghosts. "U," I whisper, "I bring the ghosts of all your former selves, and of your people." Again she groans, though weaker; the pleasure-groan of a woman making love. Her body stretches, stiffens. Her nails rake Kuara's back. She accepts me, then; accepts her self. I fill her flesh.

And bring the quiet, for the third time in her life. Down and down into the sand she seeps, leaving nothing of her self behind, her hands around Kuara's wrists as she pulls him after her, the zani's guinea-fowl feather whipping behind him as if in a wind. She passes through sand, Carnival's concrete base, moonrock, moving ever downward, badger-burrowing. She breaks through into a darkness streaked with silver light: into the core of the moon, where live the ancestral dead, the ghosts of kia. She tumbles downward, crying her dismay and joy, her kaross fluttering. In the center of the hollow, where water shines like cold silver, awaits Tuka, arms outstretched. He is laughing — a shrill, forced cackle. Such is the only laughter a ghost can know whose sleep has been disturbed. They will dance this night, the three of them: U, Tuka, Kuara.

Then he will teach her the secret of oa, the poison squeezed from the female larvae of the dung beetle. Poison for arrows he will teach her to make. Poison for which Bushmen know no antidote.

She will hunt when she returns to Gai and to Doctor Stefanko.

She will not hunt animals.

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In which a musician of rare talent comes to the village of Lime Tree, where the villagers worship a rat god who keeps his Folk in order....

Paid Piper

BY
TANITH LEE

In the later summer afternoon, the river lay thin and shallow among its smooth stones. A young girl kneeled there, washing her long dark hair with a little piece of soap. Her name was Cleci, and she was fourteen.

Up on the left-hand bank stood a group of lindens. Their leaves were powdered by the summer dust, which floated in the air like smoke. Beyond the lindens was the village of Lime Tree, which was called for them. It was a large, sprawling, prosperous village, of many narrow streets and open squares, that stood in the midst of its own wheat fields. While beyond the right-hand bank of the river, these fields ran off into Lime Tree's vineyards, where the red grapes ripened on their stocks.

Lime Tree understood why it was so prosperous. It wisely worshipped the rat god, Raur, and Raur therefore kept his folk in order. Other places might be plagued by vermin that spoiled the crops and fouled the granaries, but not Lime Tree village. Lime Tree took gifts to Raur in his white-washed temple by the ford. After the harvest, in thanks and homage, they would lay wheat sheaves, apples and wine on his altar.

Last Spring Festival, Cleci, along with thirty other young girls had been made a Maiden of Raur. This happened to all the many daughters of the village when they were about fourteen or so. It meant that they were allowed into the sanctuary, to gaze on Raur for the first time. Cleci thought him very beautiful, for he was five feet tall and carved of flawless pale marble, with rose-opal eyes. His rat's face was intelligent and amenable. The rich people of the village kept white fur rats in gilt cages, and Cleci had determined she

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too would have a white fur rat to talk to and to play with. She began to save up her pennies, of which she got but few. She was the washerwoman's daughter, and her father was dead. She would fetch the washing, help wash it in the tubs of scalding water, help dry it in the yard, then carry it back to the houses it had come from. Already Cleci's hands were rough, and she put them behind her back now, when she went to the temple, in memory of Raur's soft silken paws.

Every fifth day, Raur was worshipped, but in winter, spring and late summer, there was a great festival. Lime Tree would deck itself with ribbons and banners. There would be eating and drinking and dancing in the streets. And Raur's image would be taken out of its sanctuary, though veiled — the Lime Treeans were only permitted to look at him face to face on special occasions — and up and down the by-ways on the shoulder of his priests. Finally he would be borne through the fields to safeguard and bless them. When night fell, there would be bonfires, colored lamps, and singing. Cleci was looking forward to the Summer Festival, which was now less than a day away.

That was why she had stolen the hair-washing soap from her mother. The washerwoman cared more for the cleanliness of the shirts and dresses of paying neighbors. But Cleci had now used all the soap, rinsed her hair, and sat combing it into a dry dark shining in the wide westering bars of the sun. As she did so, she mentally counted over her pennies. There were only ten, however, and counting did not increase them. Which was a pity, since she would need twenty times that number to purchase a white rat from the priests.

Suddenly, all the birds in the lime trees stopped singing. Then a new bird began to sing.

Cleci lifted her head, astonished, wondering what the bird could be. Its voice was much fuller and more mellow than that of any she had ever listened to. And, if possible, more sweet. Yet the trillings and flights of music must definitely be those of a bird, for only something natural could sound so primitive, strange, and marvelous. Then the song broke into a double cascade of extraordinary harmonizing notes, took on, in addition, a wild, dancing rhythm, and began to come along the right-hand bank above her. She realized it could not be a bird after all. She stood up involuntarily, to see. And so she saw the Piper.

There had, once or twice, been minstrels — pipers, harpers — who had passed through Lime Tree. But never one who made music like this. Or who looked like this.

His hair grew to his shoulders, and it was a curious somber red, like no red hair she had ever seen. There was a full, loose wave in it, too, like the shapes the wind made of grasses, clouds or smoke.... His skin was fair,

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not tanned at all, and his eyes were large, and blue as distance. His breeches were also blue, but the blue of a storm sky, and his sleeveless jacket the dark crimson of old wine. The pipe was of a pale plain wood and hung from a cord about his neck. He looked about twenty-two years of age, yet somewhere in his eyes he was much older. Yet his smile was the same age as Cleci.

"Who are you?" he said to Cleci, after he had smiled at her and filled her with a bizarre elation.

"I'm Cleci. Who are you?"

"Who do you think I am?"

"I thought it was a bird, singing."

"Ah," said the Piper. He tilted back his head on his young, strong neck, and looked up into the linden tops. And all at once three or four birds flew from the branches, dipped across the river, swooped to him and dropped, soft as leaves, onto his shoulders.

"Oh," said Cleci. "Oh."

"Oh, yes," said the Piper. The birds kissed him on the lips with their sharp pointed beaks. Other birds were drifting down into the grass, hopping past his feet. A grass snake coiled round his ankle. A butterfly flickered in his red hair.

"*Oh,*" sighed Cleci.

"I saw a temple by the ford," said the Piper. "Who do you worship there?"

Cleci blinked.

"Raur," she said with automatic pride. "The rat god."

"Why?" said the Piper.

A great stillness came when he asked her, as if the land listened too.

"Because..." said Cleci. "because he keeps his creatures from harming us. And because — he's beautiful."

"Is he?"

The Piper looked at her. Suddenly she felt ashamed. She did not know why. She stared at the ground and said, "Excuse me, please. I must be getting home."

And then she turned and ran, straight through the shallow river, up the slippery stones and up the bank. She ran under the lindens and towards the village. She was afraid.

When she got home to her mother's small house, the washerwoman scolded her. For running off, for stealing the soap, for using it on her hair. All through the scolding, Cleci thought of the Piper. All through supper, Cleci thought of him. And as the day went down through a rift of swarthy red in the west, and the east closed to a shadowy blue, still Cleci thought of him. But by then her fear had gone, and a weird disappointment taken its place. She had begun to think she had dozed at the river and dreamed him. She dared not tell her mother, certainly, for dreaming of a young man. Or was he so young as he looked? Could he possibly be as old as that something inside his eyes? "You," her mother would say. "You dreamed of being a princess when you were ten. *When I am a prin-*

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cess, you would say. Doing the washing cured you of that. Then you wanted to be a priestess of Raur. As if they take anyone, boy or girl, who isn't from a rich man's house. Then, since you were Raur's maiden, and saw the white rat in the miller's hall that day, all you would talk of was having a white rat we could never afford. And now you've met a beautiful young piper by the river. A likely tale!" No. Cleci would not tell her mother, for this was what her mother would say, and it was all true. It made Cleci despondent to think he had only been a dream. For there should be such people in the world.

"You've not eaten your supper," Cleci's mother scolded her. The washerwoman wrapped up the bread and cheese and put it away carefully for tomorrow.

Cleci went to the open door and looked out into the narrow street. The roofs leaned near to each other overhead, and the darkening sky rested on the gap between.

Suddenly all the dogs in Lime Tree, and there were a great many, began to bark and yelp and howl.

"Whatever's up?" said the washerwoman, as she lit the lamp. "They sound like a pack of wolves, they do."

But then the dogs fell silent. Down the street came flowing, soft as the cool air, ripple on ripple of exquisite melody. It was an evening song, delicate yet piercing as the first stars coming out overhead. The pipe sounded deeper now, darker, old as the earth, or nearly.

A light fell over Cleci's shoulder onto the road. She realized her mother had come to the door, the lamp in her hand.

'Why—" said Cleci's mother, "whoever's that? He's a rare musician, whoever he is."

The Piper came walking along the street like a lynx, yet every fifth or seventh step, he would give a curious little skip, and the music would skip with him. He held the pipe sideways-on to his lips, and his cheeks scarcely altered their shape at all as he blew.

Other lights were falling out of doors and windows as people came to see. No one spoke at first, merely watched, and listened. But that changed presently. For behind the Piper, drifting like mist in his footsteps, came most of the cats of Lime Tree and, mingled with them, all the dogs that had been able to slip their ropes. And the dogs and the cats not fighting, not even glancing at each other, a brindle, low-backed army, gliding to the tune of the pipe.

Cleci heard, along the way, the bursts of exclamation and oaths which marked their progress. Then the river of music came in again, filling the holes these sounds had punctured in the atmosphere. Cleci's mother did not speak, but she let out a great sigh, as if she had been holding her breath her entire life and now could let it go. She set her free hand on Cleci's shoulder, and

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for once the contact was aware and gentle.

Just then, the Piper went by their door. He angled his head to look at them, but said nothing. Cleci wished she could touch him, to be sure he was real. Then he had gone.

A cat slid across Cleci's feet.

People stood in the street, staring, as the wonderful music faded like a scent.

"Where's he going?" she heard someone ask. They had not thought — or dared — to question the Piper himself.

"Towards the miller's house, looks like."

The miller was one of the important men of Lime Tree village, being one of the richest. His eldest son was a priest of Raur.

"Did you see the animals?"

"Funny things, cats."

"The dogs were after the cats, obviously."

"What does he want?"

"How do I know? Why are you asking *me*?"

"Tomorrow's Festival Day. Maybe he wants to play for the dancing. For a fat fee."

"Ah. That will be it."

"Ah."

Cleci felt a strange excitement under her ribs, like pain. She wanted to scream or laugh or sing. She wanted to be quiet as a stone.

"He's only another vagabond," her mother suddenly said, and Cleci turned and saw her mother, a worn, raw-handed stranger, her eyes tired to death and greasy hair hanging in them. "Just another beggar." And Cleci hated her mother with a dull and grinding hate.

One last absconding dog rushed noiselessly up the street, pursuing the invisible tide of music that had flowed away there.

Cleci took her white Maiden's Dress out of the chest and put it on. It was not yet light, and so she was able not to observe that the whiteness of the dress had faded. She tied a scarlet ribbon at her waist. The baker's wife had given it to her because it had a tear, but, tied carefully, the tear was not apparent.

Her mother anxiously grumbled, because today she was not allowed to work.

All through the night, perhaps once every hour, at the moment when it turned over into every next hour, Cleci had woken. She had wondered what *the miller and the baker and the smith*, and the other important rich men, had said to the Piper. She had wondered if the Piper would lead Raur's Procession as, very occasionally, the most accomplished minstrels had been chosen to do.

Even before the sun was up, Lime Tree was hanging banners from its top windows, but the colors did not show, or the paintings of magical scenes to do

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with the rat god: Raur turning a plague of rats and mice aside from the village; Raur battling a giant crow like a black dragon.

"I must go now," said Cleci to her mother.

"There'll be enough Maidens," said Cleci's mother disparagingly. "They won't miss *you*."

But Cleci ran out of the door and along the street.

As she ran towards the temple, the sun rose above the winding clutter of houses, and all the banners burst open like flowers into green and crimson and violet. Gilt discs sang on streamers in the dawn wind, and little effigies of Raur, made of clay or pastry, bounced lightly on their strings.

The river was the color of the sky. Even the lindens were streaked by cool gold. Cleci picked a spray of blossom, thoughtlessly killing it because it was beautiful, and put it in her hair.

Lime Tree was prosperous, and had many children, many young men and girls. All told, this year, there were a hundred Maidens, for a girl remained a Maiden till her wedding day, when she would be about sixteen or seventeen. Then she became a Matron of Raur.

The Maidens came together on the bank above the ford, like a flock of white ducks. Next, the boys arrived, with their rat masks made of thin wood, their wooden swords, their skin tabors, and all their shouting. Raur would be carried out into the morning on the shoulders of the priests, the Maidens and the boys would follow Raur back into the streets, and the rest of the village would pour after them.

Sugar plums were being given out. The masked-boy rats had some difficulty getting them through their mouth holes. The Maidens ate with dainty self-consciousness and wiped their sticky fingers on the grass. Today it did not matter so much that Cleci was the washerwoman's daughter. Some of the girls actually spoke to her. One of the baker's daughters even said loudly to her: "How nice that ribbon looks on you. I can't see the tear in it at all."

"Look! There's our illustrious daddy!" cried another daughter, more loudly still, over all the general noise.

Out of the temple walked Lime Tree's eminent men. The baker and the butcher came first, then the miller, the smith and the wainwright. Last, but not least, the vintner. Behind them, however, came only empty air. Cleci strained her eyes, trying to find the Piper in it. Perhaps he would come out next, with the priests.

"He will *not*," said the baker's daughter, and Cleci realized she had spoken aloud.

"Indeed not," said the miller's daughter. "My father says he won't permit such lawless music to be played before the god. Not that he heard the fellow play, of course, but daddy's so clever, he didn't need to hear, to judge."

The sugar plum Cleci had eaten curdled in her stomach. Disappoint-

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ment felt like toothache. Then she felt a wave of elation instead. And then the commotion began.

The Maidens turned in a snowdrop flurry. The boys turned their pointed handsome rat faces. The priests, who were just starting to spill from the temple door, spilled faster, craning to see.

Out of Lime Tree came striding a wonderful young man in a sleeveless jacket of wine-red, and storm-blue breeches. His hands balanced a pipe, held sideways-on to his lips, but you could not hear it over the crowd's hubbub. Only — only *feel* the music of it, that somehow pierced through air and light, bone and blood, and in at the walls of heart and mind.

His dark red hair blew back from his clear pale forehead, and he was smiling as he piped. Behind him came a flood tide of living creatures, of cats, of dogs, a skitter of little lizards, a low-flying wing of birds, and a fizzing of insects even, dragonflies, butterflies and bees. There were all the village's twenty horses, too, one with a saddle on it, the rest trailing chewed-through tethers. And there were *rats;* the tiny white bounding rats, that somehow — how? — had got out of their cages.

The sight of the rats, or maybe it was finally the unheard yet *experienced* glamor of the piping, caused the entire vociferous crowd to break into silence.

At which, of course, the music became audible.

But it was not like music any more. It was like the river, the sky, the country. Like the pulses of the crowd beating, the drums of life itself, and the sun spinning on the blades of space and time. More music than a single piper could produce, from the slender reed of a single pipe.

When suddenly the music stopped, everyone was left floundering, as if cast abruptly out of a great sea. Or as if they had all gone deaf.

Cleci became aware that the veiled statue of Raur had been carried out of the temple and was shocked she had not previously noticed. Now Raur sat there on his garlanded stretcher, balanced on the priests' shoulders, still as everything else. As if he, too, had been entranced by the pipe.

The Piper lowered the instrument slowly. He looked about. Cleci could not help admiring him for his magnificent poise, assurance and charm with so many hundreds of eyes fixed on him. Then one of the rich men bellowed, and everyone instead looked at him. It was the miller.

"*How,*" demanded the miller, choleric in the face, not poised at all, nor very assured, certainly not at all charming, "*how* did you steal our rats out of their cages?"

There was a small ripple of bemused agreement, and someone else shouted from the crowd: "And how did he loose my dad's dapple mare and all?"

Then a welter of voices. How this, How that.

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The Piper just waited for them to finish. Which, inevitably, they presently did. Then the Piper said to the people of Lime Tree, in a voice that carried without shouting:

"You try to lock everything up in a cage. Your animals and your hearts. But love will always get out. Love, or hate. Somehow."

Cleci shut her eyes. She held the words to her like a precious stone. She did not understand them, but she clung to them. Then she heard the Piper say:

"So tell me now. Do I lead you in the dance, or not?"

And Cleci screamed, at the top of her lungs:

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Then clapped her hands to her burning cheeks, opening wide her eyes in horror. But it was all right, for the whole crowd had cried out at exactly the same moment that she had, and the same words. Even the miller had, though he looked perplexed, and he turned immediately to the priests and spoke to them. The priest who was the miller's son nodded and stepped forward. He called to the Piper nervously.

"We're willing to elect you to play for us, to the honor of Raur. But what will you want paying?"

"Whatever you think I deserve," said the Piper.

"Oh, come now. That's an invitation to haggle."

"Don't be afraid," said the Piper. "I won't ask you for anything you can't give me."

And he smiled that smile that was only fourteen years of age, and his eyes were several centuries old.

One of the priests squeaked, and Cleci saw the white rats from the temple cages had also somehow got free. There were about fifty of them, and they were scampering through the priests robes and over their toes to get near the Piper.

"Raur himself, it seems, has chosen you, pre-payment or not," said one of the older priests, and his face had relaxed. A slow warm sigh passed over the crowd, and at that moment the rim of the sun dazzled right up over the temple roof.

They carried Raur along every street, through every alley, across every square. By the doors and under the bannered windows. Beneath arches, where ribbons and flowers danced with them. Round the wells. Up the stairs. Not a treading place of Lime Tree was left untrod. The priests strode over it, and the men walked, and the Maidens and the women danced. The boys banged their tabors and the priestesses shook bells. And before them all, the Piper went, neither striding nor dancing nor walking, but something of all three. And the pipe sang like the voice of the day, like the voice of the earth itself.

By noon they came to the big square where the meat was roasting and the bread popping crisply out of the ovens. No one was tired. Somehow

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their feet kept tapping or making little dance steps. Then the barrels of wine were broached. Even the Maidens drank the wine. A furry rat came and sat on Cleci's arm, and she fed it, loving the way it held discs of pastry in its paws, nibbling the food like a squirrel.

Birds lay thick as strange summer snow on the sills and roofs. Cats played chase and battle over the backs of the dogs. Lizards basked fearlessly. No one quarreled. The baker allowed the butcher should have the best cut of the meat. The butcher insisted the baker should have it. The miller's daughter said to Cleci, shyly, "You are much prettier than any other girl here." And she made Cleci take her own waist ribbon of blue silk, three inches broad, and quite flawless.

Then they went on, and the pipe, which somehow had never ceased to play — or had they only imagined it had not, for of course the Piper would have stopped playing to eat and drink too — soared up like a golden bird, and all the golden birds soared after it.

The sun lay on the streets in shining coins. Cleci ran dancing, hand in hand with the miller's daughter and the baker's daughter.

When the procession broke from the town and they saw the fields, stretching like yellow forests away into the blue sky, they laughed for gladness. It was all so exotic and so new to them. Though they had seen these things every day of their lives, they saw them now for the first time.

They danced through the fields, garlanded with sunlight. Now the priests were dancing too, though all the marble weight of Raur was on their shoulders. Wild flowers were painted on the wheat. The Maidens brushed them with their fingers, but did not tear them up. Cleci touched the blossom in her hair, and her eyes filled with tears because she knew that, though it died, the blossom forgave her for plucking it without need. And she looked back for her mother in the great shimmering, dancing crowd that seemed to have been spangled with gold dust. When Cleci could not see the washerwoman, instead she called to her from inside her head: *I love you. I do.* And she visualized her mother's tired, irritable face smoothing out, as it had never really been smoothed since the day Cleci's father died. But then the dance whirled even individual caring from her mind.

Of all the paths among the fields that might be trodden, they did not miss one with their treading. They crossed the river, and the far fields were loud with their music and voices. And then they went up to the terraces where the vines bloomed in soft crimson rust, and the Piper led them between the stocks.

Baskets of sweets, of grapes, and flagons of wine were passed along the procession. They made no pretense at stopping now. They were less wearied than they had been at midday. Weariness was unknown to them. They

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could dance forever.

And the priests were laughing now. Everyone was. Or was it the pipe which laughed?

And, then, the day began to go. It was curious, for it had seemed the day, too, would last forever. But still, it was a lovely departure, the sun folding itself away under a wide pink wing, a violet light filling the enormous sky, and stars like bright birds coming to hover in that enormity.

Then the colored lamps were lit. The Lime Treeans put their god down on the grassy slopes between the vineyards and the wheat fields. They lay on their elbows on the fragrant back of the world and watched the last stain of sun linger on the river below and the village beyond the river. And the village flamed softly as a burning rose in the moment before the dusk drank up the sun.

Do I live THERE? Cleci asked herself in wonder. *In so beautiful a place?*

A cat lay over her knee, and she kissed its head.

And then she thought about the music of the pipe and how, rather than making them listen, it had made them see and feel and *know*. And now Cleci knew so much, she knew that the world belonged to her, and she must love it and cherish it so that it might love her also. And she knew she would live forever, even after her body had died. And she knew that she, and all men and women, and all beasts, and all forms of life, had been born simply in order to be happy.

Then the pipe stopped.

In the great stillness she heard the evening breeze flying low over the slopes. She sat on the grass and smiled, as if she had just woken from a miraculous dream which she would never forget. And there was no face in all the crowd, wherever she glanced, that looked any different from her own. She felt then younger than the youngest child and older than the hillside.

The Piper was standing about halfway up the hill, and he was clearly visible. The breeze lifted strands of his hair tenderly and set them down. His face was radiant and still as the dusk. Yet his eyes, which were the dusk's color, glowed and shone. They were full of untold emotions. Emotions that perhaps no human had ever felt before, if ever. And although he stood above her on the hill, Cleci was slightly puzzled as to how she could see all this so well from such a distance.

Some of the priests and all Lime Tree's important men were walking slowly towards the Piper. They walked as they would have walked after a good dinner, contented, savoring.

Cleci heard their voices through the medium of the same intense clarity as had shown her the Piper's eyes.

"Well, Piper. I take it all back. You're a find, and no mistake. I've never known such piping."

"Never felt so good after the procession, either. Where's the blisters I always get?"

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"Ah. And where's my wife's swollen ankles?"

"On her feet?" innocently suggested the butcher, and the rich men burst out in childish guffaws, slapping each other on the back.

"There's more to come, more dancing yet," said the baker. "There's the bonfires to be lit, and the best wine casks to be broached. But I say we should pay you now, to reward you for this fine day's work."

"Is that your only reason," inquired the Piper. His head was raised, as if braced for a blow. There was a sudden strange tearing in his face, as if he knew an ancient, but well-remembered stab of pain.

"Oh, just for good measure," said the miller. "You know what they say: Once you've paid the piper, you can choose the tune."

"Not," said the miller's priest son, with anxious courtesy, "that the tunes you already played for us were not singularly splendid."

"State your fee," said the vintner. "Whatever you like. Gold if you want — I'm sure we're all agreed. I'll even throw in a cask of my best ruby."

"Yes, gold. And as much bread as you can carry."

"One hundred gold pieces, I say. And the pick of my forge."

"One hundred and fifty. And the pick of my stable."

Then came a long nothing of soundlessness. The wind died, the cat sprang abruptly from Cleci's knee. She held her breath, and, as by the river in the westering sun the first time she met him, she felt a dreadful shameful fear.

She could hardly bear the Piper's face, so rare, so young, so old, so braced against agony. His whole body seemed braced against it now. As if slowly he were being wrenched apart, or beaten, or pierced by thorns, or iron nails.

At last he said, softly, his voice carrying to the edges of the sky, "I don't want any of that."

The rich men chuckled, uneasily now.

"You're not saying that you've played for *free*?"

"No. I'm not saying that."

"Never heard one turn his nose up at gold before."

"What I want is better than gold."

The priests seemed to draw together, their faces closing, their eyes watchful. The rich men still blustered.

"Well, then," said the miller. "Come along, lad. What *do* you want?"

Everyone on the slope seemed to realize the miller's awful gaff. Even he. He should not have called the Piper "lad." But the Piper, in his slow invisible anguish, only said:

"Don't you know what I want?" He turned his head and looked at them gravely. In that vast crowd on the darkening hill, he seemed to miss no one. And when he looked in Cleci's eyes, she grew cold. "Do you truly not know? Are you truly so blind? Can

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you really only see commerce and cages? Only pray to save your goods or to fill your bellies? Could you never pray merely from the joy of being alive? *That*," he said, and turning, he pointed towards the veiled statue of Raur, which stood there shrouded and inanimate in the gathering of darkness, "that is the symbol of your limitations. Don't you want to be free?"

"But Raur is beautiful," Cleci whispered under her breath. But she knew now he was not so beautiful as life, nor as the Piper, nor music, nor the land itself. Raur meant security, but not joy. Or not true joy, which only the Piper could teach them.

The crowd rustled. Some were getting to their feet, and some huddling down. Overhead the sky was almost black.

"Choose," said the Piper. "The cage, or the world."

The miller shouted at him:

"Today was a festival. You're all right for festival days. But we can't carry on like this every day. There's work to do. Money to make."

"Look at the flowers," said the Piper, quietly, "look at the stars. How gorgeous they are, and how well they live. And are they making money, do you suppose?"

His voice smiled, but you could hear there was a knife in him, in his very soul.

"Corrupter!" Bawled one of the priests. "Blasphemer!"

Other priests took up the cry. All at once, most of the crowd was thundering. Only here and there someone wept, usually a woman.

"The fee I wished for," said the Piper, and even over the din they heard him, "was to win your love away from that statue of a rat, which is not any kind of a god, whatever you may say."

Screams of outrage roiled on the slope. Again the Piper spoke, and again they heard him.

"But you won't pay my fee, will you? You won't open your cage and follow me."

From somewhere a stone whirled over the sky and tried to smash the Piper on the cheek, then another and another. A rain of stones and clods of earth flailed round him, and then ended, because none of the missiles had hit its mark. Like frightened wretches who have pulled the tail of a chained lion, only to find the chain is unfastened, the crowd collapsed on itself. The priests flung themselves down the hill to the feet of Raur the rat god. They tugged off his veil, and there he was, in all his marble magnificence, for the people to cling to. He would keep them sane and safe. He would drive off the rats and make sure that the granaries were full, and that some would get rich and all could dream of it. He would ensure there was always a profit to bicker over, someone better off to be jealous of, someone to cheat, someone to hate. And if any struck you in the face, Raur the Rat would be sure to lesson you

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that you in turn must strike them back.

"Save us!" The priests and people yelled to Raur, clasping his chilly smooth sides.

Cleci remembered how she had hidden her rough hands from him, embarrassed to be poor.

The Piper watched the people on the hill, silently. And, just as before, his quiet spread to them, and their noise went out like the flames that were somehow going out in all the colored lamps.

"I can't force you," he said at length. They all heard him, and most of them shuddered. "There would be no point in that."

"Our god is protecting us," some screeched.

"Go away, you evil magician. Take your devil's music and go."

The Piper turned. It was odd. He appeared to be limping. Perhaps one of the stones had hit him after all.

All the stars seemed to die.

From the depths of the crowd, a woman squealed spitefully:

"He's just a great tall insolent child. A wicked child that needs whipping."

At that, the Piper turned back. His face was a white blank that seemed to have no features.

"Am I to be wicked for you?" he said softly. "Yes, perhaps I can be. I'd forgotten that. As for children ... I couldn't lead you aside from your ugly rat god. But it seems a pity to me your children should be enslaved to him, as you are. I think I will take your children away from you."

On the hill, empty of day, of winds, of stars, of kindness, the crowd trembled.

"Yes," said the Piper. "My fee. Not your gold, and not your love. Your children I'll have."

Someone whimpered.

Cleci stared, but the Piper was not on the hill any more.

Then she felt a sharp pinch on her arm. The miller's daughter hissed at her: "Why, you little thief. You've stolen my ribbon. Give it back, or my daddy will have you ducked in the river."

Cleci tore the blue ribbon from her waist and threw it at the miller's daughter. Cleci jumped up before she knew what she was doing. She ran away, up into the night-black vineyards.

The only light in the vineyards seemed to be Cleci's own dull whitish dress. No moon showed, and no stars. The black sky must be choked by black clouds. The vines hung around her, also black. Once she turned her foot and looked down and saw a silvery thing. One of the priestesses' bells, dropped during the procession.

The day seemed a hundred miles away, and she knew he was nearer. She had only, it seemed to her, to wish to find him, and she would do so. But she was afraid. She could not bear to find the Piper, though she had come

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looking for him. She cried, and rubbed her eyes on her hair and her sleeves, till the scent of her tears blotted out the sweet tang of the grapes.

"Don't cry," he said to her eventually, out of the dark.

"Why not," she said. "You have spoiled everything."

She was so afraid of him, she did not become any more afraid from speaking to him in this way, though she understood by then, he was supernatural and a god.

"I regret the spoiling," he said from the darkness, "but I would do it again."

"Why must we love you and not Raur?" she demanded. "*Why?*"

"You know why. Of them all, you know."

"Yes ... because he's only a stone. But you are—"

"Yes. I am."

"Then, what difference does it make to you?" she asked him, sensing omnipotence, fire, eons, and all of them his.

"Because, quite simply, unless I am believed in, I shall die. And when I die, Cleci, some part of the spirit of humanity dies with me."

"Yes," she said. She sighed and sat on the grass between the stocks. She could not see the grapes or his hair. If she had been able to, they would have been the same red. "Couldn't you," she said, "perform some magic to convince them?"

"The magic is everywhere. They're not convinced. Water can be turned into wine or blood. I shall have to die for them, before they believe in me."

"I believe in you," she said.

"I know you do. That is why I am here."

"But the children," she said. "You mustn't take the children away."

"I'll spare you," he said.

She said hotly, "I'm not a child."

When he laughed gently, she knew for sure how dangerous he was. The others had been determined not to know, averting their eyes from the truth of him. He was like a snake, coiled in the shadows, smooth as glass, with the bite of death in his mouth which had made music.

"You spoke of love, but you're cruel," she said.

"Yes. Love is cruel, when denied. I'm sorry for your village, but I would do that again, too, if it were to be done. I will be remembered."

"They'll remember wrongly." She looked away into the vines and the night. She knew she would not see him physically any more. "How," she said, "will you take the children? Will you play the pipe and make them follow you, as the cats and dogs and rats followed you? Will you pipe them into the deep water below the ford?"

"No, Cleci," he said. "It's easier, and more vile, than that. But still, recollect when you are older, I promised I would spare you, and I shall. Because you believed in me, and through you I can exist. A while longer."

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"How long have you lived?" she murmured, dazed.

"I was born on the day the first men thought of me. I shall die on the last day, when the last man forgets."

She beheld his loneliness then, like a pale mote in the night. She stared at it and pictured him, a god who was lonely and dying. And somewhere in that staring, sleep came.

When the sun rose, she got up and looked about her and saw only the fields and the vinestocks, the shallow river, the dusty lindens, and the sprawling village. And when she had gone home alone, she saw the poverty of her mother's house. And when her mother slapped and cuffed her for being gone all night, and called her horrible names, Cleci saw that, too. Yet through it all, she dimly perceived, as if through smoke or water, how the earth had been, and how it still might be, under its veil of misery and lies.

In the days which followed and in the weeks which followed these, the Piper was spoken of in fear and whispers and later in noisy jibes and sneers. No one heard the pipe, and soon no one listened for it. The children ran in the streets and yards and along the river. Despite his threat, he had not taken the sons and daughters of Lime Tree. Not only was he a vagabond and blasphemer, but a charlatan also.

Not until the first still-births occurred at the summer's end, did any nervous awe steal through the prosperous village. And then, when winter had come, and spring and summer, and another summer's end, and no fresh births with them, only then did a leaden horror blow through Lime Tree like the winter winds. And like the winds, which stripped the lindens of their leaves, so Lime Tree lay under the snow, stripped of its future. No new life was conceived, or born, and would never be. He had said he would take their children, in place of their love and their gold, and he had done it. Lime Tree withered among its wheat fields, and, one by one, its lindens died.

When Cleci was eighteen, the river mysteriously silted up. That was the year her mother died, too. She died of hard work more than anything, for hard work does actually kill, when it is hopeless, and has too meager a reward.

Cleci went away to the south, and some years later, when she had borne her first child, she carried him to the shrine she had made and laid an offering on the altar, grapes, and a lock of her own dark hair, and a flask of wine. And, as each of her children grew, she taught them whom they must worship.

She did this, not out of fear of him, but out of pity. Because she had come to see the ultimate terrible truth behind all others. Which was that the stupidity and avarice and hatred of mankind had finally begun to make him also stupid, avaricious, hating, and cruel beyond reason. Even though he was a god, a god of love.

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Pamela Sargent's last story here was "Exile," (December 1975). Her most recent novels are WATCHSTAR (Pocket Books) and THE ALIEN UPSTAIRS (Doubleday). The superior story below will form part of a new novel, THE GOLDEN SPACE, which will be published next year by Timescape Books.

The Summer's Dust

BY

PAMELA SARGENT

Andrew was hiding. He sat on the roof, his back to the gabled windows. He had been there for only a few minutes, and knew he would be found; that was the point.

He heard a door open below. "Andrew?" The door snapped shut. His mother was on the porch; her feet thumped against the wood. "Andrew?" She would go back inside and find that he was still near the house; tracing the signal, she would locate him. He glanced at his left wrist. The small blue stone of the Bond winked at him. The silver bracelet was a tattletale chain; it would give him away.

He looked down at the gutter edging the roof. The porch's front steps creaked, and his mother's blonde head emerged. A warm breeze feathered her hair as she glided along the path leading down the hill. From the roof, Andrew could see the nearby houses. At the foot of the hill, two kobolds tended the rose garden that nestled near a low stone house. The owner of the house had lived in the south for years, but her small android servants still clipped the hedges and trimmed the lawn. Each kobold was one meter tall, and human in appearance. On pleasant evenings, he had seen the little people lay a linen tablecloth over the table in the garden and set out the silverware, taking their positions behind the chairs. They would wait silently, small hands crossed over their chests, until it was night, when they would clear the table once more. A troll stood by the hedge; this creature was half a meter taller than the kobolds. The troll's misshapen body was bent forward slightly; its long arms hung to the ground, fingertips touching grass. At night, the troll would guard the house. The being's ugly bearded face and scowl were a warn-

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ing to anyone who approached; the small silver patch on its forehead revealed the cybernetic link that enabled it to summon aid.

Farther down the road, the facets of a glassy dome caught the sun, and tiny beings of light danced. Andrew's friend Silas lived there with his father Ben and several Siamese cats. Andrew frowned as he thought of Silas and of what his friend wanted to do.

Andrew's own house was old. His mother had told him it had been built before the Transition. Even with extensive repairs and additions to the house, the homeostat could not run it properly. The rooms were usually a bit warm or too cold; the doors made noises; the windows were spotted with dirt.

He watched his mother wander aimlessly along the path. Joan had forgotten him, as she often did. They could be in the same room and she would become silent, then suddenly glance at him, her eyes widening, as if she were surprised to find him still there.

His father, Dao, was different; completely attentive whenever Andrew was around, but content to ignore him the rest of the time. He wondered if Dao would ever speak to him at all if Andrew didn't speak first.

He moved a little. His right foot shot out and brushed against a loose shingle. Andrew slid; he grabbed for the window sill and held on. The shingle fell, slapping against the cement of the path.

Joan looked up. She raised her hands slowly. "Andrew." Her voice was loud but steady. He pulled himself up; he would not fall now. Joan moved closer to the house. "What are you doing up there?"

"I'm all right."

She held her arms up. "Don't move."

"I've got my lifesuit on."

"I don't care. Don't move, stay where you are." Her feet pounded on the steps and over the porch. The front door slammed. In a few moments, he heard her enter his room. Her arms reached through the open window and pulled him inside.

Andrew sighed as she closed the window, feeling vaguely disappointed. "Don't ever do that again."

"I'm wearing my lifesuit." He opened his shirt to show her the protective garment underneath.

"I don't care. It's supposed to protect you, not make you reckless. You still could have been hurt."

"Not at that distance. Bruises, that's all."

"Why did you do it?"

Andrew shrugged. He went over to his bed and sat down. The bed undulated; Joan seemed to rise and fall before him.

"Why did you do it?"

"I don't know."

"Do I have to have a kobold follow you around? I thought you were too old for that."

"I'm all right." I wouldn't have died

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or anything, he thought.

Joan watched him silently for a few moments. She was drifting again; he knew the signs. Her blue eyes stared through him, as if she were seeing something else. She shook her head. "I keep forgetting how old you are." She paused. "Don't go out there again."

"I won't."

She left the room. He rose and crossed to the windows, staring out at the houses below and the forested hills beyond. His room suddenly seemed cramped and small; his hands tapped restlessly against the sill.

Andrew was sitting on the porch with Dao and Joan when Silas arrived. The other boy got off his bicycle and wheeled it up the hill to the porch. He parked it and waved at Andrew's parents. Joan's thin lips were tight as she smiled. Dao showed his teeth; his tilted brown eyes became slits.

Andrew sat on the steps next to Silas. His friend was thirteen, a year older than Andrew. He was the only child Andrew had met in the flesh; the others were only holo images. Silas was big and muscular, taller than Joan and Dao; he made Andrew feel even smaller and slighter than he was. Andrew moved up a step and looked down at the other boy.

Silas rose abruptly. Brown hair fell across his forehead, masking his eyes. He motioned to Andrew, then began to walk down the hill. Andrew followed. They halted by the hedge in front of the empty stone house. The troll waved them away, shaking its head; its long tangled hair swayed against its green tunic.

"How about it?" Silas said as they backed away from the hedge.

"What?"

"You know. Our journey, our adventure. You coming with me? Or are you just going to stay here?"

Andrew held out his arm, looking at his Bond. "We can't go. They'll find us."

"I said I'd figure out a way. I have a plan."

"How?"

"You'll see," Silas said. He shook his head. "Aren't you sick of it here? Don't you get tired of it?"

Andrew shrugged. "I guess."

Silas began to kick a stone along the road. Andrew glanced up the hill; Joan and Dao were still on the porch. They had lived in that house even before bringing him home, making one journey to the center to conceive him and another when he was removed from the artwomb. They had gone to some trouble to have him; they were always telling him so. "More people should have children," Dao would say. "It keeps us from getting too set in our ways." Joan would nod. "You're very precious to us," Joan would murmur, and Dao would smile. Yet, most of the time, his parents would be with their books or speaking to distant friends on the holo or lost in their own thoughts.

Joan could remember the begin-

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nings of things. Dao was even older. He could remember the Transition, when the world had realized that people no longer had to die. Dao was filled with stories of those days — the disorder, the fear, the desperate attempts to reach as many people as possible with the treatments that would give them youth and immortality. He always spoke of those days as if they had been the prelude to great adventure and achievement. Gradually, Andrew had relized that those times had been the adventure, that nothing important was likely to happen to Joan and Dao again. Dao was almost four hundred years old; Joan was only slightly younger. Once, Andrew had asked his mother what she had been like when she was his age. She had laughed, seeming more alive for a moment. "Afraid," she had answered, laughing again.

Silas kicked the stone toward the hill. "Listen," he said as they climbed. "I'm ready. I've got two knapsacks and a route worked out. We'd better leave this week before my father gets suspicious."

"I don't know."

The taller boy turned and took Andrew by the shoulder. "If you don't go, I'll go by myself. Then I'll come back and tell you all about it, and you'll be sorry you didn't come along."

Andrew pulled away. Silas's face was indistinct in the dusk. Andrew felt anxious. He knew that he should be concerned about how his parents would feel if he ran away, but he wasn't; he was thinking only of how unfair it had been for them to assume that he would want to hide in this isolated spot, shunning the outside world. They had told him enough about death cults and accidents to make him frightened of anything beyond this narrow road. He knew what Silas was thinking, that Andrew was a coward.

Why should I care what he thinks, Andrew thought, but there was no one else against whom he could measure himself. He wondered if he would have liked Silas at all if there had been other friends. He pushed the thought away; he could not afford to lose his one friend.

As they came toward the house, Andrew saw his parents go inside. A kobold was on the porch, preparing for its nightly surveillance; behind it, a troll was clothed in shadows. Silas got on his bicycle.

"See you," he mumbled and coasted down the hill recklessly, slowing down as he reached the bottom, speeding up as he rode toward his home.

The kobold danced over to Andrew as he went up the steps. It smiled; the golden curls around its pretty face bobbed. A tiny hand touched his arm. "Good night, Andrew," it sang.

"Good night, Ala."

"Good night, good night, good night," the tiny voice trilled. "Sleep well, sweet dreams, sweet dreams." The troll growled affectionately. The kobold pranced away, its gauzy blue

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skirt lifting around its perfect legs.

Andrew went inside. The door snapped shut behind him, locking itself. He walked toward the curving staircase, then paused, lingering in the darkened hallway. He would have to say good night.

He found his parents in the living room. He knocked on the door, interrupting the sound of conversation, then opened it. Dao had stripped to his briefs; Joan was unbuttoning her shirt. On the holo, Andrew saw the nude images of a blond man and a red-haired woman; a dark-haired kobold giggled as it peered around the woman's bare shoulder. The flat wall-sized screen had become the doorway into a bright, sunny bedroom.

"Five minutes," Dao said to the images. "We'll call you back." The people and the room disappeared. "What is it, son?"

Joan smiled. Andrew looked down at the floor, pushing his toe against a small wrinkle in the Persian rug. "Nothing. I came to say good night."

He left, feeling their impatience. As he climbed the stairs, he heard the door below slide open.

"Andrew," Joan said. She swayed, holding the ends of her open shirt. "I'll come up later and tuck you in. All right?"

I'm too old for that, he wanted to say. "I'll be asleep," he said as he looked down at her.

"I'll check on you anyway. Maybe I'll tell you a story."

He was sure that she would forget.

In the end, he went with Silas, as he had known he would. They left two days later, in the morning, stopping at Silas's house to pick up the knapsacks. Silas's father was out in the back, digging in his garden with the aid of a troll; he did not see them leave.

They avoided the road, keeping near the trees. When they were out of sight of Andrew's house, they returned to the road. Andrew was not frightened now. He wondered what his parents would say when he returned to tell them of his journey.

Silas stopped and turned around, gazing over Andrew's head. "A kobold's following us." Andrew looked back. A little figure in blue was walking toward them; it lifted one hand in greeting.

"What'll we do?"

"Nothing, for the moment." Silas resumed walking.

"But it's following us." Andrew walked more quickly, trying to keep up with his friend's strides. "We could outrun it, couldn't we? It won't be able to keep up."

"That's just what we can't do. If we do that, it'll tell the others, and we'll have your parents and my father on our trail."

They came to a bend in the road. Silas darted to one side and hurried through the brush. Andrew ran after him, thrashing through the green

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growth. It had rained the night before; the ground was soft and muddy, and leaves stuck to his boots. Silas reached for his arm and pulled him behind a tree.

"Wait," Silas said. He glanced at Andrew, then peered at him more closely. Andrew stepped back. Silas was looking at his chest. Andrew looked down. One of his shirt buttons was undone, revealing the silver fabric underneath.

"You're wearing a lifesuit."

"Aren't you?"

"Of course not. You're stupid, Andrew. Don't you know you can be tracked with that on?"

"Not as easily as with a Bond." He wondered again what Silas was going to do about their Bonds.

"Take it off right now."

"You can't hurt me, not while I'm wearing it."

"I'll leave you here, then."

"I don't care." But he did. He took off his knapsack and unbuttoned his shirt. Twigs cracked in the distance; the kobold had tracked them. Andrew removed his lifesuit, and handed it to Silas.

As he dressed, Andrew felt exposed and vulnerable. His clothing seemed too light, too fragile. He watched as Silas dug in the mud, burying the lifesuit with his hands. He looked up at Andrew and grinned, his hands caked with wet earth.

"Get behind that tree," Silas said as he picked up a rock. Andrew obeyed, flattening himself against the bark. A bush shook. He could see the kobold now. For a moment, the android looked like a man; then it moved closer to another bush and was small again. Its dark beard twitched.

"Silas," the kobold called. "Silas." It shaded its eyes with one hand. "Silas, where are you bound? You should not come so far without protection." The creature had a man's voice, a tenor, but it had no resonance, no power; it was a man's voice calling from far away. The kobold came closer until it was only a meter from Andrew, its back to him as it surveyed the area.

Silas moved quickly, brushing against Andrew as he rushed toward the kobold. He raised the rock and Andrew saw him strike the android's head. The little creature toppled forward, hands out. Andrew walked toward it slowly. Silas dropped the red-smeared rock. The small skull was dented; bits of bone and slender silver threads gleamed in the wound. The silver patch on its forehead was loose.

"You killed it."

"I didn't mean to hit it so hard. I just wanted to knock it out." Silas brushed back his hair with one dirty hand. "It's only a kobold. Come on, we have to go. Now that its link is out, another one'll come looking for it."

Andrew stared at the body.

"Come on." He turned and followed his friend. They came to a muddy clearing and went around it. Silas led him to a nearby grove of trees.

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Two cages rested against a tree trunk. Two cats, trapped inside, scratched at the screening. "I told you I had a plan," Silas said. "Now we take care of our Bonds."

"I don't understand."

The other boy exhaled loudly. "Messing up the signal's too complicated, and we can't take them off and leave them because the alarm would go out after a minute or so. So there's only one thing left. We put them on somebody else. Or something else. The system can't tell if it's us or not; it only knows that the Bonds are on some living thing. And it'll assume it's still us, because these Bonds are ours. Everyone'll look for us around here. By the time anyone figures it out, we'll be far away."

Andrew stared at his friend. It seemed obvious and simple, now that he had explained. "They might just wander back to your house," he murmured as he shifted his gaze to the cages.

"Not these cats. They're kind of wild. They'll stay out here for at least a day or two." He opened one cage and removed a Siamese. The cat meowed and tried to scratch. Silas stroked it tenderly. "Hold him." Andrew held the animal as Silas removed his Bond and put it around the cat's neck, adjusting it. The cat jumped from Andrew's arms and scampered away. "Now yours."

Andrew backed away. "I can't," he said. "I can't do it." His mouth was dry. He would be cut off from the world without his Bond; he had never removed it except when it was being readjusted.

"Coward. I know what's going to happen to you. You're going to run home, and your mother and father'll make sure their little precious doesn't run away again. And you'll stay there forever. You'll be a hundred years old, and you'll still be there, and you'll never do anything. And you'll always be afraid, just like them."

Andrew swallowed. He took off the Bond while Silas held the other cat. He fumbled with the bracelet and dropped it. "Here, hold the cat," Silas said, sighing. He picked up the Bond and attached it himself, then put the cat on the ground. The creature began to lick a paw.

Andrew was numb. He blinked. Silas pushed him, and he almost fell. "We have to go, Andrew. Another kobold'll be here soon."

Late that afternoon, they reached a deserted town. Weeds had grown through the cracks in the road. The wooden structures were wrecks. A few had become only piles of lumber; others still stood, brown boards showing through the worn-away paint. Broken windows revealed empty rooms.

They walked slowly through the town. A sudden gust of wind swayed a weeping willow, and Andrew thought he heard a sigh. He shivered and walked more quickly.

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A stone house stood at the edge of the town. A low wall surrounded it; the metal gate was open. Silas lingered at the gate, then went through it. The broken pavement leading to the front door was a narrow trail through weeds and tall grass. Andrew followed his friend up the steps. Silas tried the door knob, pushing at the dark wood with his other hand until the door creaked open.

The hallway was empty; dust covered the floor. Andrew sneezed. The floorboards creaked under their feet. Cobwebs shimmered in the corners. They turned to the right and crept into the next room.

Andrew sniffed. "Are we going to stay here? We'll choke." His voice was small and hollow.

Silas glanced around the empty room, then walked over to a tall window facing the front yard. "We can sleep here. If we open the window, we'll have air."

"Maybe we'd better leave it closed." Andrew wondered whether he would prefer a closed window and a dusty room to an open window in the dark. Silas did not seem to hear him; he stared through the filmy windowpane for a moment, then pushed at the window, straining against it until it squeaked open.

"Come here," he said to Andrew. He wandered to the window and peered out over Silas's shoulder. "Look."

"At what?"

Silas pushed his arm. "Don't you see anything, Andrew? Look at the town. It's like it's still alive."

He saw it. The tall grass hid the piles of lumber; only the standing houses were visible, colored by the orange glow of the setting sun. He could walk back to the town and find people preparing supper or gathering in the street. He sighed and backed away, making tracks in the dust as he slid his feet along the floor.

Silas took a shirt out of his knapsack and swept a spot clean. When he was finished, Andrew sat down. Now that he was safe, Andrew felt a little better. He had seen none of the terrible things his parents had warned him against, only old roads, forest, and a deserted town. He said, "I thought it would be worse."

"What?" Silas removed food and water from his knapsack.

"I thought it would be more — I don't know — more dangerous." He shrugged out of his knapsack and stretched.

Silas shook his head. "You listen to your parents too much. Besides, there aren't that many people around here; it's too far north."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You know. Maybe you don't, because you never went anywhere. They don't like seasons, most of them. They like places where it's always the same. Here, the fall comes, and plants die." Silas said the word *die* harshly, defiantly at Andrew. "They don't like to see that."

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Andrew accepted food from his friend, opening his package of stew and letting it heat up for a few moments. Silas smacked his lips as he ate. "Sometimes I hate them," he went on. "They don't do anything. I don't want to be like that." He paused. "Once my father had this party, when we were living in Antigua, and this guy came, I forget his name. Everybody was just sitting around, showing off what languages they knew or flirting. And some of them were making fun of this man in a real quiet way, but he knew they were doing it, he wasn't that dumb."

"Why were they making fun of him?"

"Because he couldn't play their stupid little word games. This one woman started saying that there were people who just weren't very smart, and you could tell who they were because they couldn't learn very much even with a long life and plenty of time, that they just couldn't keep up. She was saying it to this other man, but she knew that other guy heard her, she said it right in front of him."

"What did he do?" Andrew asked.

"Nothing." Silas shrugged. "He looked sad. He left a little later, and I had to go to bed anyway. Know what happened?" He leaned forward. "He went up in this little plane a couple of days later, and he went into a dive and smacked into this house down the road. You should have seen it blow up."

Andrew was too shocked to speak.

"Luckily, nobody was home. The man died, though. Some people said it was an accident, but I don't think most of them believed it. That man knew how to fly. He went diving right in there." Silas slapped his right hand against his left palm.

Andrew shook his head. "That's awful." He looked enviously at his friend, wishing that he too had witnessed such an event.

"At least he did something."

Andrew lifted his head. "But that's terrible." He thought guiltily about his own foray onto the roof outside his window.

"So what? It's terrible. Everybody said so, but it was almost all they ever talked about afterwards. I know for a fact that a lot of them watched the whole thing on their screens later on. A woman was out with her holo equipment just by luck, and she got the whole thing and put it in the system. That's the point, Andrew. He did something, and everybody knew it, and for a while he was the most important guy around."

"And he was so important you forgot his name."

"I was little. Anyway, that's why my father came here. He decided he didn't want to be around a lot of people after that. He kept saying it could have been our house." Silas threw his empty container into the corner and leaned back against the wall, smiling. "That would have been something, if it

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had been our house. Old Ben wouldn't have ever gotten over it. I'll bet he would have moved us underground."

Andrew pulled up his legs and wrapped his arms around them, imagining a plane streaking through the sky. The room seemed cozy now; the thought of danger beyond made it seem even cozier. Antigua, of course, was safely distant. He looked admiringly at his friend. Silas had seen danger, and nothing had happened to him; Andrew would be safe with his friend.

Andrew was awake in the darkness. The knapsack under his head was bumpy, and the floor was hard. His muscles ached. He thought of his bed at home.

He supposed he must have slept a little. It had still been light outside when he had gone to sleep. He listened; Silas was breathing unevenly. He felt a movement near him and realized his friend was awake. He was about to speak when he heard a click.

The front door was opening. He stiffened and held his breath. The door creaked. He heard footsteps in the hall, and his ears began to pound.

He wanted to make for the window and get outside, but he could not move. Silas had stopped breathing. The footsteps were coming toward them. He tried to press his back against the floor, as if he could sink between the boards and hide.

A beam of light shot through the darkness, sweeping toward them in an arc. Andrew sat up. The light struck him, and he threw up an arm. He tried to cry out, but let out only a sigh. Silas shouted.

Someone laughed. Andrew blinked, blinded by the light. The footsteps came closer and the light dimmed. The shadowy figure holding it leaned over, set the slender pocket light on the floor, and sat down.

The intruder's face was now illuminated by the light. It was a girl with curly shoulder-length hair. She said, "who are you?"

Andrew glanced at Silas. "I'm Silas, this is Andrew. We aren't doing anything."

"I can see that. Hold out your arms."

Andrew hesitated.

"Hold them out." Her voice was hard. The boys extended their arms. "You're not wearing Bonds. Good. I don't want a signal going out." She had one hand at her waist; Andrew wondered if she was hurt. Then she withdrew it, and he saw a metal wand. She was armed. He lowered his arms slowly and clutched his elbows.

"We're exploring," Silas said.

"You mean you're running away. I'm running away, too. My name's Thérèse. Who are you running away from?"

"Our parents."

"Why?"

"I told you, we just want to look around."

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"Then they're looking for you."

Silas shook his head. "We threw them off the track. If they're looking, they won't look here." Andrew was hoping that his friend was wrong. "Do your parents live around here?"

"I'm not running away from parents." The girl brushed a curl from her forehead. "Where are you from?"

"Oh, a long way from here," Silas answered. "It took us all day to get here. There's only three houses where we're from; there's just Andrew's parents and my father and one woman who's practically never there. So you don't have to worry." Andrew suspected that the other boy was as frightened as he was.

"I'm not worried." Thérèse reached for the light, then stood up. "I'm going to sleep in the hall. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

The boards groaned under her feet as she left; Andrew heard her close the door. He moved closer to Silas. "We can still go out the window," he whispered.

"What if she comes after us?"

"We can wait until she's asleep."

Silas was silent for a few moments. "Why bother? She's running away, too. We might be safer with her anyway. She has a weapon."

"She might be dangerous."

"I don't know. She's just another kid. If she was really dangerous, she could have lased us right here."

Andrew shuddered. "Maybe we should go home."

"That's all you can think about, isn't it, running home to Joan and Dao." Silas paused. "Something interesting's going on, and you want to hide. Look, if we have to, we can always get away later. All we have to do is go to the nearest house and send out a message, and somebody'll come. Let's go to sleep."

Andrew stretched out on the floor. Silas might be scared, but he would never admit it. He considered escaping by himself, but the thought of traveling alone in the night kept him at Silas's side.

They shared some dried fruit and water with Thérèse in the morning. Andrew realized that they would run out of food sooner if they divided it three ways. They would have to go home then. That notion cheered him a bit as they set out from town.

In the early morning light, Thérèse did not seem as frightening. He guessed that she was about twelve. She was taller than he was, but her long legs and thin arms were gangly and her chest was flat. Her cheeks were round and pink; strands of reddish-brown hair kept drifting across her face, causing her to shake her head periodically. She carried nothing except her weapon and her light, both tucked in her belt. Her shirt and slacks were dirty, and there were holes in her pants near her knees.

Andrew was on the girl's left; Silas walked at her right. Silas also seemed

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more at ease. He had joked with Thérèse as they ate, finally eliciting a smile. Thérèse was reserved; Andrew wondered if all girls were like that or only this one. He remembered the girls he had spoken with over the holo and the way a couple of them often looked at him scornfully, as if he were still a little child.

"Why did you run away?" she asked abruptly.

"I told you," Silas answered.

"I mean the real reason. Are your parents cruel, or is it just that they don't seem to care?"

"My father's all right."

"What about your mother?"

"I don't have one, they used stored ova for me."

"What about you?" she said to Andrew.

"I don't know," he replied. "Silas was going, so I went with him."

"That's not a good reason. Don't you like your home?"

"I like it fine."

"You shouldn't have left it, then."

Andrew wanted to ask Thérèse why she had run away.

"Maybe you ought to go back," she went on.

"We'll stick with you," Silas said. "You don't mind, do you?"

"If I minded, I wouldn't be walking with you, now would I?" The girl slowed, peering down the cracked and potholed asphalt. "We shouldn't stay on this road." She turned her head, surveying the area. A bridge was ahead. She pointed. "Maybe we should follow the river."

"Fine with me," Silas said. They left the road, scampering down the hill to the bank. The river flowed west; they climbed over rocks and strolled along the grassy bank.

"How long have you been traveling?" Silas asked.

"Long enough," Thérèse replied. "Since spring. A couple of months."

Silas whistled. The girl tumbled, waving her arms in an attempt to regain her balance. Pebbles rolled down the bank. Andrew reached for her, grabbing her arm. She jerked away violently, almost falling.

The slap stung his cheek. He stepped back. "Don't touch me," Thérèse shouted. "Keep away from me." Her arm was up, as if she was about to hit him again.

"I was trying to help." He crouched, holding out a hand. Thérèse was breathing heavily; her cheeks were flushed. Silas moved away from her and came closer to Andrew. The girl lowered her hands.

"I'm sorry," she said at last. "Don't touch me. Don't get too close to me. I can't stand it. All right?"

Andrew nodded. She turned and marched ahead, not looking back. Silas raised his eyebrows, then followed her. Andrew trailed behind. The look in Thérèse's brown eyes had chilled him; he had not seen the heat of anger or the wide eyes of fear, only a cold look of malice and hatred. He stuffed

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his hands in his pockets as he walked and kept back, afraid to get too close to Thérèse.

By noon they had left the river and found a dirt road that wound through wooded hills. Thérèse had remained silent, but she had also managed to smile at a couple of Silas's remarks. Andrew began to whistle a tune, then turned it into the *1812 Overture*. Silas added sound effects, shouting "Boom" at the appropriate moments. Thérèse laughed, but her mouth twisted, as if she found the whole thing silly as well.

Then she stopped, and pointed. Below them, the road dipped. A woman was walking along the road, her back to them, a kobold behind her. Apparently she had not heard them. She was moving toward a clearing; a small house, surrounded by a trimmed lawn, stood back from the road. A maple tree was in front of the house; near it, several flat stones formed a circle on the ground.

Andrew went as close to Thérèse as he dared. "What now?" he said softly.

She frowned. "We can catch up with her."

"But she'll—"

"Come on." She moved ahead quickly, and both boys followed. The woman stopped walking and lifted a slender white cylinder to her lips, lighting it; she was smoking a cigarette. Then she turned and saw them.

Her dark eyes were wide. She dropped the cigarette quickly, as if ashamed that they had seen it, grinding it out with her foot. The kobold drew near her protectively. Its white hair was short, and its eyebrows bushy; it scowled.

Thérèse, approaching, lifted a hand. "Hello."

"Hello?" the woman answered. Her greeting seemed tentative. She plucked nervously at her long black hair.

The girl moved closer, glancing at the kobold. It drew itself up, adjusting its red cape. Andrew and Silas kept behind Thérèse. Andrew was not afraid of the woman, only of the android, which might move quickly if it thought its mistress was being threatened. He kept his hands at his sides, palms open, in sight of the small creature.

"What do you want?" the woman asked.

Thérèse said, "We need food, and a place to rest. Please help us. We won't bother you, or anything." The girl's voice was higher, gentler than the tone Andrew had heard on the road. The woman gazed at Thérèse's outstretched hands, and her eyelids fluttered; Andrew was sure she had noticed the weapon at the girl's waist.

The woman straightened. She lifted her head and stuck out her chin, as if ready for a confrontation, but her hands trembled. "What are you doing out here?" Her voice was high and weak.

"We're running away," Thérèse said. "We're experiments." Andrew

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tried not to look surprised; Silas was keeping a straight face. "These biologists were testing us. I know they didn't think they were doing anything mean, but you know how they are. This one man said he'd help us if we got away. So we're on our way to his place."

The woman frowned. "I never heard of such a thing."

"They do a lot they don't talk about. They can do anything they want, because everybody depends on them. Please don't give us away." Thérèse blinked her eyes, as if about to cry.

The woman pressed her hands together. "You poor things. You'd better follow me."

She led them toward her house. Andrew noticed that she was keeping near her kobold.

The woman's name was Josepha. The inside of her home smelled musty, as if she had been away and only recently returned. She had questioned them, and Thérèse had mumbled vaguely, avoiding answering.

Now the woman sat under her maple tree with a pad, sketching, while the children sat near the house, finishing the food she had given them. Josepha, although seemingly sympathetic, still kept her kobold at her side. The android faced them hands at its waist.

"Was that true?" Andrew asked Thérèse.

"Was what true?"

"That story about the biologists."

"Of course not." With Josepha in the distance, the girl's voice was once again low and clipped. "It could be true. They made those things, didn't they?" She gestured at the kobold; it lifted its head.

"That isn't the same as experiments with people."

"What would you know about it?" Thérèse replied. "They made them, they made us, they used the same genetic material. They just make different modifications. What's the difference?"

"There's a lot of difference," Andrew protested, thinking of the dead kobold in the woods near his home. "They're limited, they can't do much without direction."

"I had to tell her something," Thérèse murmured. "It doesn't matter whether she believes it or not."

"Why not?"

"Because she won't do anything. First of all, we're kids, so she feels protective. Second, she's afraid. She won't do anything that might put her in danger, and that's why she won't alert anyone. The older people get, the fewer risks they take. Why do you think she's hiding away here? She's afraid. She'll do what we want. By the time she gets around to checking, and finding out we lied, we'll be long gone. It takes them ages to make up their minds to do something anyway."

Silas finished his roll and leaned back. "Why take the chance?" he asked.

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"I just finished telling you, it isn't a chance. She doesn't want to be threatened. I could wing her with this laser before that kobold stopped me, all it's got is a tranquilizer gun. They'd rather have their life than anything, those people, they beg for mercy, they do anything to avoid death."

Andrew felt sick. Thérèse's words were coarse and disgusting.

"Anyway, she's one of the scared ones," Thérèse continued. "I saw that right away. I've been running longer than you have. I need real food and a good night's sleep. Don't worry, I've done this before, and no one's caught me yet." Her voice was calmer.

"Why'd you run away, Thérèse?" Andrew asked.

She was staring past him, curling her lip. She was very quiet; he could not even hear her breathe. "I had my reasons," she said at last. She pressed her lips together and said no more.

They slept in Josepha's living room. That was where the woman had her holo screen and computer. The girl shook them awake at dawn. She had slept on a mat spread out on the carpet, leaving the large sofa to the boys. Andrew picked up his knapsack and hoisted it to his back while Silas yawned and stretched.

"We'd better get going," Thérèse whispered. She propped Josepha's drawing pad against the back of the sofa. She had written a message on it:

Dear Josepha,

Thank you for the food, and especially for the bath. We really are grateful. We're going to head west now to find our friend. Maybe he'll call and thank you himself when we're settled. We'll be thinking of you.

Terry, Simon, and Drew

Andrew had thought they'd been clever with their aliases; now, seeing them written out, they seemed a poor disguise. The words had been scrawled in a large, childish hand. Thérèse had transformed herself for Josepha, becoming a victimized and gentle child; she had played the role so well that even he had almost believed it. He and Silas had been merely the supporting players in the performance.

Thérèse signaled to them. They crept from the house, passing the kobold at the front door. The android looked up. "May I help you?" it asked.

The girl stopped. She seemed sad as she looked at the kobold. She raised one hand slowly and patted the kobold on the head. It smiled. "Is she good to you?" Thérèse asked. "Are you treated well?"

"May I help you? I can guide you to the road."

The girl drew back. "No, we're all right. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. It was nice to see you." It waved with one small hand.

The three headed across the lawn to the road. "Are we really going west?" Andrew asked.

"Of course not," the girl answered.

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"We're going north. Fewer people." She paused. "Maybe you two ought to go back. Josepha could get you home." She said the words stiffly, as if she did not mean them.

Silas said, "We'll stick with you."

She seemed relieved. They hiked along the road silently. The morning air was damp and cool; Andrew shivered. He wondered if his parents were looking for him now, if they had found out about the cats. Then he realized that they would probably search south first, because Silas had always talked about how things were better there.

Silas had fallen under Thérèse's spell. His friend followed her contentedly, as if happy to have found a leader. The ease of his surrender had surprised Andrew. He had thought of Silas as decisive; now he wondered if his friend had ever decided much of anything. His past actions now seemed to be only a surrender to his feelings.

He glanced at the girl as they walked. What would she do if they were found? She seemed desperate. He thought of how she had pulled away and slapped him, of how she had talked about death. She knew about him and Silas, but they knew nothing about her. Would she have hurt Josepha if the woman had tried to summon others? The girl had sounded as if she would, yet she had treated Josepha's android with kindness.

They left the road and began to climb a hill. It was dark under the trees; leaves rustled as they climbed. Thérèse's pockets bulged with cheese and dried fruit which she had taken from Josepha; she swayed as she moved. Andrew ached, though not as much as the day before.

Silas moved closer to him. "I keep thinking about my father," he said between breaths. "He must be worried. I think about it now, and it seems awful. I keep wondering why I didn't think of it before. I mean, I thought about it, but in a way I didn't."

"Does it bother you?" Andrew asked. Thérèse had moved farther ahead of them, setting her feet down heavily and awkwardly as if trying to flatten the earth. Her knees were thrust out; the upper part of her body was bent forward.

"I don't know," Silas said. "As long as I don't have to see it, it's like it isn't there. It's hard to explain. If I went home, I'd see how upset he is, and then I'd feel rotten, but here I don't see it. I know the sooner I go back, the better it'll be for him, but I'm afraid to go back, because then I'll have to see him getting mad and upset, and I don't want to."

"We have to go back sooner or later," Andrew murmured.

"I know." Silas sighed. "I didn't think of that, either. All I thought about was getting away and wandering around." He glanced up at Thérèse. Then he looked at Andrew for a moment. His eyes pleaded silently.

Andrew thought: He wants me to

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decide. Thérèse stopped and turned around, folding her arms across her chest as she waited for them to reach her. For a moment, she looked older. Her eyes were aged and knowing; her face was set in a bitter smile. The wind stirred the tree limbs above, and shadows dappled her face, forming a mask over her eyes.

In the evening, it began to rain. They found shelter under an outcropping of rock. The rain applauded them as it hit the ground.

Andrew and Silas relieved themselves, pointing their penises at the rain beyond, then sat down. The ground was hard and stony, but dry. They ate their cheese and fruit in silence, then curled up to sleep.

Andrew dozed fitfully. His legs were cramped; if he stretched them, his feet would be in the rain. He stirred, trying to get comfortable. Something pressed against him in the dark.

"It's me," Thérèse whispered. He stiffened, afraid. Silas was asleep; he could hear his slight snort as he inhaled. "Just don't grab at me, that's all. All right?"

"Sure," he whispered back.

She pressed her chest against his spine, draping an arm over him. Her body shook slighty and she sniffed. He heard her swallow.

"Thérèse. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"You're crying."

"No, I'm not." Her body was still. He turned over on his back, raising his knees, careful not to touch her with his hands, and settled his head against the knapsack. He was growing hard; he covered his groin with one hand, confused, afraid she would notice.

"Listen," he said softly, "maybe you should go home." Her hand clutched his abdomen absent-mindly; he froze and went limp. "You could stay at my house first, if you want, or with Silas. They wouldn't mind."

"I can't go home." He felt her breath on his ear. "Do you understand? Not ever. This isn't some adventure for me. I'll always have to hide."

"But you can't stay out here."

"I can. It's better than what I had. They'll stop looking when I'm—"

Andrew waited for her to finish. He heard her sigh. She removed her arm. "I won't give you away," he whispered. "I promise."

She was silent. The rain was not as heavy now; the stream of water rushing down from the outcropping had become a trickle. I'm your friend, Thérèse. He mouthed the words silently in the dark.

They stood at the top of a hill, facing north. The pine trees were thick around them; Andrew could catch only glimpses of the rolling land below.

Thérèse said, "Give me a boost." Silas cupped his hands; she raised a foot, and he boosted her to a tree limb.

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She scrambled up and gazed out at the landscape. Andrew watched her, afraid she might fall, and wondering if he should get out of the way. She crouched, hung by the limb with her hands, and dropped to the ground.

"There's a house down there," she said. "We can stop there, or go around it." She bowed her head.

"What do you want to do?" Andrew asked.

"I'm asking you." She did not look at him. "I'm going to have to move on sooner or later by myself, you know that. I don't want to get too attached to you."

Silas looked at Andrew. Andrew did not reply. The girl turned and started down the hill, motioning for them to follow. Andrew thought about Thérèse continuing on her lonely journey. She had traveled alone before meeting them. She could handle herself, but the idea still bothered him.

Why did she have to hide, living on the edge of the world? Maybe she hadn't lied about being part of an experiment. Once Dao had told him that some people were afraid of the biologists because they were dependent, all of them, on the scientists' skill. They were kept immortal by them; they were afraid to have the few children they did without the biologists' help. The dependency engendered fear. Thérèse must have made up the story after all.

There were, however, the kobolds and the trolls. He had never thought much about them. He recalled the way Thérèse had looked at Josepha's kobold, as if she were speaking to a person rather than to a being of limited intelligence. Were the androids aware of what had been done to them? Did dim notions cross their minds before being drowned out by their cybernetic links or the commands of their masters?

Andrew went down the hillside cautiously, avoiding the uneven ground and loose stones. He could now see the house. It was a two-story wooden structure, painted white; it stood a few meters from a dirt road overgrown with weeds and wildflowers. The land immediately around the house was dusty and barren, as if plants refused to take root there. A smaller building, with peeling paint, stood in back of the house.

They came to the bottom of the hill and walked up the road. "I don't think there's anyone there," Andrew said.

The girl glanced at him. "Do you think you could find your way home?" she asked.

"I guess we could. We could always go back to Josepha's house."

"You'd have to tell her we lied. It doesn't matter. I'd have a head start." They walked over the dusty ground toward the house. The lifelessness of the land around the structure was disturbing. Andrew suddenly wanted to flee.

The front door opened. Something fluttered in the darkness beyond the outer screen door. Andrew moved be-

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hind Thérèse. The screen door swung open and a kobold emerged, followed by a woman. She wore a long white dress with a high collar; she crossed the porch and stood on the top step, watching them.

Thérèse held her arms out; the boys did the same. "Hello," the girl called out.

"Why, hello." The woman waved. "Come on up here, let me take a look at you."

Thérèse hesitated. She balanced on the balls of her feet, as if ready to run. She moved a little closer to the steps. "Come on up," the woman said again. "Sit here, on the porch. I haven't had visitors in quite a while."

They went up the steps and seated themselves on the wicker chairs. The woman rested against the railing in front of them. The kobold stood near her protectively; it carried a silver wand. Andrew frowned; he noticed that Thérèse had also seen the weapon. The android's blue shirt and pants were wrinkled; its face was marred by a large nose and wide mouth. The woman beamed, unafraid.

"Your poor things," the woman said. "You look as though you've had quite a trip."

"We have," Thérèse said. Now that Andrew was closer to the woman, he could see her face. There was something wrong with it; deep lines were etched around her mouth and eyes, and her jowls shook slightly as she spoke. Her skin was rough and yellowish. Even her hair was strange. She had pulled it back from her face, showing the grey streaks around her forehead and ears.

"Your face," Andrew blurted out before he could stop himself.

The woman glared at him for a moment, then smiled again. "You think it's ugly," she said slowly. "You think it's odd. Not all of us want to look twentyish. I like to look my age." She chuckled, as if she had made a joke. "What are all of you doing way out here?"

Thérèse licked her lips. "We're running away."

"Running away. How sad. I suppose you must have a reason." She held up her hand. "You needn't tell me what it is. People are so thoughtless. I wouldn't let any children of mine run away. You look as though you could use a good meal. Come on inside."

She led them into the house. The front room was small, but clean. Lace doilies covered the arms of the worn blue sofa and chairs; two heavy brass lamps stood on end tables. The desk computer and holo screen were against the wall.

"You just sit down and take it easy. My name's Emily. I'll go get you something from the kitchen." She squinted. "You're not wearing your Bonds."

"Of course not," Thérèse said. "We're running away."

"I'll be right back."

"We'll come with you." They followed the woman to the kitchen and

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sat at the small wooden table while Emily punched buttons on her console.

"I know what you're thinking," Emily said, turning to face them while the food was materializing. "You thought I might have a communicator here. You thought I'd send for someone. Well, I won't. I didn't move out here so that I could have people dropping in all the time. I don't like people." She grinned. "I like children, though. If you want to go running around the countryside, that's fine with me, but you can stay here as long as you like."

She removed the food, took out bowls, and spooned vegetable soup into them, putting them on the table with glasses of milk and a small loaf of bread. She sat down and watched them as they ate. Andrew forgot his worries, eating the soup rapidly, slurping as he ate.

Emily nodded at them approvingly when they were done. Something in the gesture reminded him of Joan. He tried not to think of his return home. He would get through it somehow, and then it would be over. For now, he was safe.

They slept in the front room. Thérèse had claimed the sofa; Emily had provided two cots.

The girl was awake early. She bumped against Andrew's cot as she rose; he opened his eyes and sat up. He watched as she took food and water from one knapsack and put it in the other.

He said, "You're leaving."

"I left you some stuff in the other sack, enough to get you by."

"You're leaving."

"You knew I was going to sooner or later."

Silas was still sleeping, arm over his eyes. "Listen to me, Andrew," she went on quietly. "I think you should wake him up and get going yourselves."

"Emily'll help us."

"There's something funny about her. I don't think you should stay here. I have to go." She moved toward the door, then looked back at him. "Andrew, if anybody tells you anything about me someday, just remember that it isn't how it seems. I mean, I wouldn't have hurt you two, I really wouldn't have."

"I know that."

"Good-bye. Say good-bye to Silas for me, will you? And get out of here yourselves." She opened the screen door and went out.

He got out of bed and followed. The kobold was outside the door. It let Thérèse pass, trailing her to the steps. A troll sat in front of the house, its long arms folded on the ground. Thérèse bounded down the steps and walked toward the road.

The troll rose and moved rapidly, scampering in front of the girl. She hopped to one side; it blocked her. She stood still for a few seconds, swaying, then hurried to her left. The troll ran, blocking her again.

"Let me pass," he heard her say to

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the creature. She stepped forward, and it hit her. She backed toward the porch.

Andrew watched, confused and apprehensive. Thérèse turned and faced him. Her chest rose and fell; her pink cheeks were becoming rosier. She squinted and shook her head. She spun around suddenly and danced to her right. The troll blocked her again; it was too fast for her.

Her hand fluttered at her waist. She removed her wand, pointing it at her antagonist. Andrew saw a flash of light; Thérèse cried out. For a moment, he did not know what had happened. The girl swayed helplessly, holding her right arm. The kobold darted past her and swept up the rod on the ground.

Andrew hurried back to Silas and shook him awake. The other boy moaned.

"Silas. Get up."

"What?" He shook his head and stared blankly at Andrew.

"Thérèse. The kobold shot at her."

Silas was awake. He jumped from the cot, following Andrew to the door. Thérèse had retreatd to the porch, still holding her hand.

"Are you hurt?" Andrew asked as he opened the door.

"No. Just my fingers. I'm all right."

"Listen, there's three of us. If we can distract the androids, maybe you can get away."

She shook her head. "I can't do that. I don't have my weapon now. This is my fault, I got careless. We should have left as soon as I saw she wasn't afraid."

"We'll be all right," Andrew said. "She probably just told them to guard us. As soon as she wakes up—"

"How do you know that?" Thérèse interrupted. "How do you know she isn't trying to keep us here?"

He didn't know. He went back inside and crossed the room to the console. He pressed a button.

"Code, please," the computer responded.

The machine was locked. Andrew shivered, backing away. Thérèse and Silas had come back inside.

"It won't work," he muttered. Thérèse was staring past him.

"How are my young visitors this morning?"

Andrew turned. Emily stood at the entrance to the room. She wore a gingham gown; her greying hair was loose around her shoulders. Another small kobold stood at her side; it too was armed.

Thérèse drew herself up, eying the woman belligerently. "We appreciate your hospitality," she said slowly. "We'd like to be on our way."

"Not so soon. I haven't had visitors in ever so long. Do take off that knapsack, and I'll get breakfast ready."

"We'd like to leave now," Thérèse said.

"But you can't."

"Why not?" Silas said loudly. His voice was high, breaking on the second word.

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"Because I'm not ready to let you go." Emily smiled as she spoke. "Now sit down. What would like? Let's have pancakes. That would be tasty, now wouldn't it?"

Thérèse moved toward the woman, stopping when the kobold extended an arm, pointing at her with its weapon. Its black eyes narrowed. "You'd better be careful," Emily went on. "They're very protective of me, and I wouldn't want you hurt because of a silly mistake. Now sit down and stop being naughty. I'll get breakfast."

They spent the day in the living room, guarded by the kobolds. Andrew had been unable to eat breakfast or lunch; Silas had lapsed into a sullen silence. Thérèse kept wandering over to the window, as if searching for a way to escape. Occasionally Emily would come to the door, smiling in at them solicitously. In the afternoon, she brought them a Chain of Life puzzle. Silas applied himself to it, assembling the pieces until he had part of the helix put together, then abandoned the puzzle to Andrew.

Andrew worked silently, trying to lose himself in concentration. The kobolds, standing nearby, watched without speaking. Once in a while, he looked up. The black-eyed android held its weapon with one hand while stroking its dark beard with the other. The blond one near the screen door was still. They were both ugly, the ugliest kobolds he had ever seen; it was as if Emily, with her own lack of beauty, wanted nothing beautiful around her. He wondered if she had made the creatures mute as well.

Andrew broke down at suppertime. Food had been laid out on the coffee table next to the helix. He stuffed himself, not tasting anything; Silas picked at his chicken while Emily hovered, beaming at them. Then she settled herself in a chair and sipped wine. She wore her white dress, but the setting sun in the window made the dress seem pink.

Thérèse was not eating. She scowled at the woman and drummed her fingers on the arm of the sofa. A finger caught in the doily. Thérèse tore at the lace, and it fluttered to the floor.

Thérèse said, "Give me some wine."

"Aren't you a little young for that, dear?"

"Give me some wine."

Emily poured more of the pale liquid into her glass and handed it to the girl. Thérèse downed it in two gulps and held out the glass. The woman poured more wine. Thérèse leaned back. Her face was drawn.

Andrew's stomach felt heavy and too full. Silas, seated cross-legged on the floor, had stopped eating. Emily said, "Would you like to hear a story?"

"No," Andrew replied.

"I'll tell you one, and then maybe you can tell me one."

Thérèse raised her glass, peering

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over it at the woman. She said, "Go ahead, tell it. It better be good."

"Oh, it is." Emily sat up. "It's very good. It's about a lovely young woman, like a princess in a fairy tale."

The young people were silent. Emily stared at the helix for a moment. "Once, there was a lovely young woman," she began. "She lived in a beautiful house on the edge of a great city, but she was very sad, because the world beyond was cruel and hard. Even in her citadel, the evil of the world outside could reach her. It was as if everyone was under an evil spell; a dark spirit would come upon them, and they would go to war. Do you know what a war is?"

No one replied.

"That's when people take all their talent and organize themselves to kill other people. Well, one day, something wonderful happened. The wars stopped. They stopped because some people had found a way to keep from dying. Now, before that, they had already found a way to stop people from aging as rapidly; they had a substance that cleared out all the protein cross-linkages."

"We know about that," Andrew said impatiently.

Emily shot him a glance. "Hush, child. Let me finish. These people had found a way to make everyone younger. You see, they were trying to find out about cancer, and they learned a lot about cells, and they found that they could stimulate the body to rejuvenate itself and become younger. No longer did our genetic structure condemn us. When people realized that they could live forever, the world changed. It was made beautiful by those who knew that now they would have to remain in it forever. We call that time the Transition."

Andrew fidgeted. Thérèse sipped her wine. Emily's long fingers stroked the arms of her chair; her pale hands had small brown spots around the blue veins.

"The young woman was happy. She opened her house to others, and they all spoke of the new age, their escape from death. But then the young woman began to grow weak. Soon she discovered that evil was still in her body. A malignancy was growing within her, her cells were out of control." Emily paused. "It didn't matter. The growth was soon inhibited by another substance, which enabled her immune system to control the disease. But later, when she received her rejuvenation treatments once more, the cancer returned. Her body was a battleground; her own cells were at war."

Emily's voice was trembling. Andrew moved a bit closer to Thérèse.

"Do you understand?" The woman's voice was firm again. "It was as if the woman had been cursed. When she received the treatment that would allow her to live, the disease returned, because the same process that caused her body to renew itself allowed those cells to grow. When she took interfer-

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on — that is what controlled the disease — she would be well, but growing older. Do you understand now? Each time, she grew a bit older physically than she had been; she was aging — very slowly, to be sure, but aging nonetheless. There were others who had the same problem, but she did not care about them."

The woman tilted her head. "She became a project," she went on. "Biologists studied her. They discovered that she had a defective gene. The substance that enabled her body to rejuvenate itself triggered a response, and cancerous cells would multiply along with those that made her younger. Now these scientist were able to keep this gene from being passed on to others, but they could do little for the woman. They tried but nothing worked."

Andrew sat very still, almost afraid to breathe. Thérèse threw her head back and finished her second glass of wine. Silas cleared his throat uneasily.

"The young woman left the world," Emily said. "She didn't want to be where she could see the youthful bodies and cheerful spirits of others. When she had clung to hope, she had drifted into depression and deep sorrow. Now she released her hopes and accepted her situation and found a freedom in so doing. Denied life — denied, at least, a full life — she would accept death, and find peace in the acceptance. So, you see, the story has a happy ending after all."

Emily's green eyes glittered. For a moment, her face seemed younger in the evening light.

Thérèse spoke. "The woman can still stay alive. She can still be helped. It's her own fault if she gives up. More is known now, isn't it?"

Emily smiled. "You don't understand. Hope was too painful. Even healthy ones sometimes seek death, even now, you know that. The evil hasn't disappeared, but it too has its consolations, even its own beauty. Flowers are beautiful because they die, aren't they? And isn't there a special poignancy in thinking of something you've lost? It's a mercy. That's what people used to say about death sometimes, it's a mercy. It was a good death. He didn't linger, he isn't suffering now, he's gone to meet his Maker, he's cashed in his chips, he's gone to his reward. Many of the old expressions were quite cheerful." She lowered her chin. "There is little new knowledge now, only tinkering, little workshops where they play with genes and make things like those." She waved a hand at one of the kobolds. "Something else died when we decided to live, and that was great change. There is no hope for the woman, but it doesn't matter. There is a happy ending, you see. There, I've told you a story. Now you can tell me one."

Silas looked up at Andrew apprehensively. Andrew lifted his head, unable to gaze directly at Emily. "We don't have a story," he mumbled.

"Come now. Of course you do, all

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alone in the middle of nowhere without your Bonds."

"No, we don't."

"Maybe your girl friend has one, then. Don't you, Terry? Why don't you tell it?"

Thérèse held out her glass. "Give me a drink first."

"You've had quite enough," Emily said, but she poured more wine anyway. Thérèse rose and walked over to the window; the dark-haired kobold moved closer to the woman. Thérèse turned around.

"All right. I'll tell you a story." She took a breath. "A girl was living with a man. She'd lived with him all her life. He wasn't her biological father, but he was the only parent she had ever known. He'd brought her home and cared for her ever since she'd been born." Her voice shook a bit as she spoke.

"A rather abrupt preface," Emily said. "But do go on."

"At first, he was kind. Then he changed. He began to come to her room at night. He'd make her do things, and sometimes he hurt her. It got to where she sometimes even liked the pain, because he'd be sorry for a while afterwards, and he'd be nicer when he was sorry, and do what she wanted. But then it would start again. She tried to run away, but he hurt her badly, and she was afraid to try again. It was all her fault. That's what he made her think. Everything he did was her fault, because something in her led him to do it."

Thérèse's voice did not tremble now; it was flat and toneless. She perched on the window sill; her face was shadowed.

"She was still growing. She began to change. The man didn't like that, because he didn't like women, only girls. So he began to give her the same thing that kept him young. It was tricky, but he managed. No one found out. They lived alone, and not many people saw her. He was only doing what the biologists do, wasn't he? He was shaping a body to be what he wanted, that's all, that's how he looked at it. The years went by, and the girl grew older, while still remaining a child. The man began to forget that she wasn't what she seemed."

Thérèse gulped the rest of her wine and set the glass on the sill. "The girl was careful. She watched the man and bided her time. One day, she was able to escape, and she did. My story has a happy ending, too."

Andrew realized that he was digging his fingers into his thighs. He tried to relax. Emily was watching the girl out of the sides of her eyes.

"You didn't tell the whole story," the woman said at last. Thérèse shook her head. "Tell the rest. The girl didn't just run, did she? She killed the man while making her escape, didn't she?"

Thérèse did not reply.

"They're looking for her. She's still missing. She killed someone. You know what they'll do when she's found? They'll send her up." Emily

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pointed at the sky. "They'll exile her, they'll send her to a prison asteroid, with all the other murderers. She'll have to stay there. After a year of low gravity, she'll need an exoskeleton to live on Earth again. There won't be a happy ending if she's caught."

Thérèse moved her arm, hitting the glass. It fell to the floor, shattering. Andrew started. Emily rose. "Enough stories for tonight, don't you think? It's time to rest now."

She left. The bearded kobold remained; the blond one went out on the porch and stood in front of the screen door. Andrew got up and went to Thérèse. "It isn't true."

She said nothing.

"It isn't true, Thérèse. They won't send you away, they can't."

She pushed him aside and threw herself across one of the cots. He hovered at her side, wanting to touch her, but afraid to do so. She hid her face. Her body was very still.

The kobold made a sound. "Others," it said and Andrew started. "Others, before. Other visitors. Gone now. Go to sleep."

The raspy voice made Andrew shiver. Silas stood. He picked up a plate and smashed it on the floor. Thérèse turned her head. Silas broke another plate. 'Stop," the kobold said.

Andrew went to his friend. "Silas." He reached for the shadowy shape and held the other boy by the shoulders.

Silas shook his head and pushed Andrew away. "I'm all right now." He sat down on the sofa. Thérèse was lying on her side, her hip a dark hyperbola obscuring part of the window.

Silas lifted his chin. "Did you really do it?"

"Do what?" Her voice was flat.

"What she said."

"I didn't mean to. I was trying to get away. He tried to stop me. He should have let me go. When it was over, I was glad. I'm glad he's dead." The cot squeaked as she settled herself. "Go to sleep."

"Go to sleep," the kobold echoed.

Silas said, "We have to get out of here."

Thérèse did not answer. Andrew stretched out on the other cot. The girl seemed resigned. He realized that Thérèse had only exile to anticipate, more wandering or a prison world. He heard footsteps in the hall; they faded, and the back door slammed. The house was quiet; outside, crickets chirped. There was light just beyond the window; the moon had risen.

Silas got up and went around the cots to the window. He put his elbows on the sill. The small shape outside the screen door disappeared; a small head appeared near Silas, making him look, for a moment, like a two-headed creature. Silas stood up.

"Come out," the blond kobold on the porch said. It was a black shadow with a silver nimbus around its head. "Come outside."

Silas backed away. The bearded kobold crossed to the screen door. "Go

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on," it whispered, as if conspiring with them.

Silas came closer to Andrew. "They want to help us."

Andrew shook his head. "No, they don't. They don't want to do anything. Emily tells them what to do. Don't listen to them."

"If I could get away, I could get help. It's worth a try, isn't it?"

"Don't go outside, Silas." He looked toward Thérèse. "You tell him. Tell him not to go."

"Andrew's right," Thérèse said from the cot.

"They said there were others," Silas replied. "Maybe they helped them get away."

"You're wrong. Kobolds can only do what they're told; they have to be directed. They don't have minds." But Andrew heard the doubt in the girl's voice.

"It's worth a chance, isn't it?" Silas said. "Maybe you don't want to go because you know what's going to happen to you when you're caught. You don't want help to come. You don't care what happens to us."

"Don't go," Andrew said.

Silas leaned over him; Andrew could feel his breath. "It's your fault, too." Andrew shrank back, puzzled. "You should have stopped me before, if you hadn't come along, I wouldn't be on this trip. And it's her fault for having us stop here. I'm not going to stay because of what you tell me." He walked to the door; the bearded kobold let him pass. The screen door slammed behind Silas.

Thérèse slid off her cot and stood up. The kobold made a circle with its wand. She moved closer to the creature and it pointed the wand at her. Andrew rolled off his cot toward the sofa, trying to decide what to do. Thérèse backed to the window. The android's head turned.

Andrew's hand was reaching for the brass lamp near him. He pulled out the cord. He seemed to be moving very slowly. Thérèse lifted a hand to her face. He picked up the lamp. The kobold was pivoting on one foot. He saw its face as he leaped, bringing the base of the lamp down on its head.

It squeaked. The wand flew from its hand, clattering across the floor. Andrew hit it again and it was still as it fell, its limbs stiff. He dropped the lamp and began to shake.

Thérèse was breathing heavily. "You took a chance," she said. "You really took a chance." She knelt and began to crawl over the floor. "I have to find that weapon."

"Use your light."

"I lost my light."

Andrew remembered Silas. He went to the door. Thérèse was slapping the floor. He breathed the night air and smelled dirt and pollen. Opening the door cautiously, he went out on the porch; his skin prickled as a cool breeze touched him.

The blond kobold was below, in front of the porch. Silas was running

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across the barren yard, kicking up dust. The troll was blocking him, leaping from side to side and waving its long arms as if playing with the boy. Silas darted to the left, but the creature was too quick for him. It herded him, driving him back toward the house. The boy hopped and danced, coming closer to Andrew.

Andrew came down the steps, pausing on the bottom one. The kobold saw him. He could hear Silas panting; there were shiny streaks on his friend's face. The troll put its hands on the ground and swung between them on its arms, lifting its knees to its chest. It grinned, showing its crooked teeth. Then Andrew saw Emily.

The woman had come around the side of the house and now stood to Andrew's left, watching the pursuit. Her white dress shone in the moonlight and fluttered in the breeze. She raised her hands as if casting a spell, and Andrew saw that she was holding a wand.

He opened his mouth to cry out. His throat locked; he rasped as breath left him. The woman pointed her wand. The beam struck Silas in the chest. He fell. Andrew heard a scream.

He stared numbly at his friend. A black spot was covering Silas, flowing over his chest; his eyes gazed heavenward. "Silas?" Andrew murmured. He swayed on the steps. "Silas?" The troll stood up; the kobold stood near Silas's head. Dust had settled in the boy's thick hair.

Emily was walking toward him, still holding the wand. She was smiling; the blue stone of her Bond seemed to wink. Andrew faced her, unable to move. His limbs were heavy; invisible hands pressed against him. He saw one white arm rise.

A beam brightened the night. Andrew gasped. Emily was falling. Andrew clutched at his abdomen and spun around, almost falling from the step. Thérèse was climbing through the window; her feet hit the porch. She came to the railing and leaned over it, firing at Emily with her weapon. The white dress was stained. The kobold raised its wand. Andrew dove for it as it fired, and heard a cry. He wrested the weapon from it and knocked the creature aside.

Thérèse was screaming. She continued to fire at Emily. One beam struck the woman in the leg; another burned through her head. One arm jerked. The stone on Emily's Bond was black. Thérèse kept shooting, striking the ground near the body.

His vision blurred for a moment. He found himself next to the girl. "Thérèse, stop." She cried out as he reached for her and held out her left arm. Her hand was a burned, bloody claw; he gasped and touched her right shoulder. She tore herself from him and went down the steps to Silas. She knelt in the dirt, patting his face with her right hand.

"I was too late," she said. She was crying. The kobold sat up, rubbing its head. Andrew gripped his wand, aim-

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ed it at the android, then let his arm drop. The troll scampered to the side of its dead mistress. It lifted her in its arms and held her. A sudden gust whipped Andrew's hair; he caught the metallic smell of blood in the summer's dust....

Joan tried to stop Andrew at the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I want to say good-bye to Thérèse."

Joan frowned. "I don't think you should."

"She's my friend."

"She killed two people." Joan's voice tripped over the word *kill*. "She's very ill."

"She's not. She did what she had to do. She had to kill Emily."

Joan stepped back. "That woman was very distrubed, Andrew. She needed help, reconditioning. She was ill."

"She wasn't ill. She was going to die, and so she wanted other people to die, too, that's all." He thought of Emily's body in the dirt, and his throat tightened; Thérèse had cursed their rescuers when they destroyed Emily's kobold and troll. The troll had looked at Andrew before it died, and he had thought he saw awareness in its eyes.

Joan took him by the shoulders. Her eyes were narrowed; her lips were pulled back over her teeth. "You'll forget all this. The psychologist will be here tomorrow, and that will be that. You'll think differently about this incident."

He twisted away and went out the door. Dao was outside. He let Andrew pass.

A tent had been put up at the bottom of the hill, a temporary shelter for Thérèse and the two psychologists who were now with her. They had questioned the girl and interrogated him; they had set up a tent because Joan had been afraid to have the girl in her house. Now they would take Thérèse away. The evil in his world would be smoothed over, explained and rationalized. Thérèse would not be sent to an asteroid; only people who were hopelessly death-loving were sent there, and even they could change, given enough time. That was what the female psychologist had told him. They had high hopes for Thérèse; she was young enough to heal. They would help her construct a new personality. The mental scars would disappear; the cruelty would be forgotten. Andrew thought of it, and it seemed like death; the Thérèse he knew would no longer exist.

Thérèse came out of the tent as he approached. The brown-skinned woman followed her; the red-haired man was near their hovercraft, putting things away. Thérèse reached for Andrew's hand and held it for a moment before releasing it. The psychologist lingered near them.

"I want to talk to him alone," Thérèse said. "Don't worry, you'll find out all my secrets soon enough." The woman withdrew. Thérèse led Andrew inside the tent.

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They sat down on an air mattress. The girl looked down at the Bond on her right wrist. "Can't get this one off so easily," she muttered. Her mouth twisted. She gestured with her bandaged left hand. "They're going to fix my hand first," she went on. "It'll be just the way it was, no scars."

He said, "I don't want you to go."

"It won't be so bad. They told me I'd be happier. It's probably true. They're nice people."

Andrew glanced at her. "Ben might clone Silas. That's what he told Dao. He's thinking about it. He's going to go away."

"It won't be Silas."

"I know."

Thérèse shook back her hair. "I guess I won't remember much of this. It'll be like a dream."

"I don't want you to forget. I won't. I promise. I don't want to forget you. Thérèse. I don't care. You're the only friend I have now."

She frowned. "Make some new friends. Don't just wait around for someone else to tell you what to do." She paused. "I could have just aimed at her arm, you know. Then she would have still been alive."

"She was dying anyway."

"They could have helped her eventually. She was dying very slowly. I didn't have to kill Rani, either." Her eyes were wide; she stared past him. "I didn't. He was down, he begged me to stop. I kept hitting him with the poker until his skull caved in. I wanted to be sure he wouldn't come after me. I was glad, too. I was glad he was dead and I was still alive."

"No," Andrew said.

"Stop it." She dug her fingers into his shoulder. "You said you didn't want to forget me. If you don't see me the way I am, you've forgotten me already. Do you understand?"

He nodded, and she released him. His eyes stung; he blinked. "Listen, Andrew. We'll be all right. We'll grow up, and we'll be alive forever. When everyone lives forever, then sooner or later they have to meet everyone else, don't they? If we live long enough, we're bound to see each other again, it'll be like starting all over."

He did not reply.

"It's true, you know it's true. Stop looking like that." She jabbed him with her elbow. "Say good-bye, Andrew. I don't want you hanging around when we leave. I won't be able to stand it."

"Good-bye, Thérèse."

"Good-bye." She touched his arm. He got up and lifted the tent flap. He wanted to look back at her; instead, he let the flap drop behind him.

He climbed the hill, trying to imagine endless life. Joan and Dao were on the porch, waiting for him. He thought of Silas. You'll always be afraid, just like them; that was what his friend had said. No, Andrew told himself; not any more. His friend's face was suddenly before him, vivid; Joan and Dao were only distant, ghostly shapes, trying to face up to forever.

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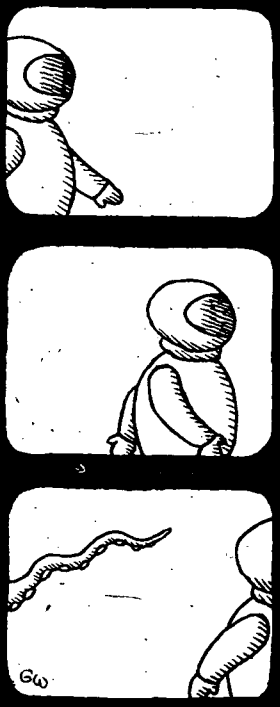
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

MUNDANE MUNSTERS AND MULTICOLORED MUNCHKINS

"Poor Searles," they'll say. "His brain rotted from watching too much TV, and when there's nothing on the tube, he does his own reruns on the VCR."

This may be true. On the other hand, I'm very interested in TV as a creative medium, so, of course, I watch nothing made for it in this country excepting some PBS stuff. On the other, *other* hand, there is this column, which means I *have* to watch things I ordinarily wouldn't. Last week was a typical melange; here's a log of three consecutive days. What interested me about these three days and their mixture of new and old (on videocassette) was that every item was fantasy, not s/f, and with one exception, not even supernatural/horror. "Pure" fantasy has been rapidly expanding as a genre in the past decade in written form; seems like film and television, as usual about ten years behind, may be catching up.

Wednesday looked easy; only one half-hour show, based on the book, *Faeries*. Unfortunately, I got caught in an overlapping Costeau special, which hooked me with one of the most startling images I'd ever seen — a school of hammerhead sharks shot from below, their extraordinary shapes silhouetted against the dazzle of the surface.

But, aha! — the trusty VCR to the

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rescue, and I record *Faeries* for later viewing.

That is one recording I am *not* going to keep. Done in that anything-but-animated animated style so familiar from Saturday mornings, it took a variety of types of Little People from the book (which was a sort of guide to fairies) and wove them into a massively uninteresting plot about a wicked shadow that wants to black out Fairyland. The voices were excruciating — at one point the hero says, "How can we GIT to it?" — and all in all, it was a disaster.

Thursday evening was a social one, and after the usual strident argument, the votes went to a Maria Montez movie and *Topper*, both on cassette. The Montez film, of course, was a campy popcorn popper, but I have a soft spot in my heart (or head, as the case may be) for Maria and her Universal stock company; in the '40s, they were the tail end of the *haute*-Islamic fashion of *Hassan, Kismet*, and *The Thief of Bagdad*, but still the only fantasy we got aside from Hollywood whimsy like *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*. Usually, they could only be called fantasies by courtesy of their Arabian Nights settings, about as exotic then as Burroughs's Barsoom; however, the one seen that evening was *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves*, which has that voice-activated cave door ("Open, Sesame!"), though not much else Scheherazade would recognize.

I'd recorded *Topper* last Hallowe'en when it was shown on the local PBS station, but I didn't watch it then, nor had I seen it for quite a while before. It's considered less funny than the two later Topper films, and I can see why. Neither they or the even later television efforts to do it had the darker elements that Thorne Smith so often included in his books, despite his reputation as a ribald writer about booze and broads. The film of *Topper* has that acid edge; the ghostly Marion Kirby is dead serious about trying to seduce Topper, for instance, and her equally ghostly husband George is honestly angry about it.

This odd ambiguity is confusing to those expecting a typical 1930s screwball comedy, or who have not read Smith.

Friday night was a corker; *The Wizard of Oz* playing against a made-for-TV movie bringing back the Munsters, and both overlapping another made-for-TVer involving witchcraft. Even my trusty VCR couldn't cope with this so I started out over dinner with the remote controller (which is how it got mashed potatoes in it, shades of *Close Encounters*) and hoped for the best.

I'm the wrong age to have been a Munster fan. I may have always been the wrong age, and I resent their close resemblance to the creation of the wonderful Charles Addams, the Addams family. (Of course, one can also go back to that most delightful of early Bradbury stories, "The Homecoming,"

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about an equally funny but much more sinister family.)

So *The Munsters' Revenge* didn't do much for me; the humor was pretty lame (Dracula-ish Grandpa: "Some of the best blood in Europe flows in my veins."), though I liked Fred Gwynne's gentle-hearted Frankenstein's monster and Yvonne DeCarlo's mother (she succeeded Ms. Montez as queen of the sex and sand epics).

I kept going over to *The Wizard of Oz*, which was no help. Being an old Oz hand from the books, I've always been puristically annoyed at the movie. At one point I managed to land right in the middle of "Ding, Dong, The Witch Is Dead," which reminded me of the possibly apocryphal story that production was held up for days by the myriad miniature Munchkin midgets who keep insisting on singing, "Ding, dong, the *bitch* is dead." But seeing all those Munchkins, who, as we know, wear *only* blue, dressed in pink, red, and green, enraged me to the point of fleeing to the witchcraft flick, *Midnight Offerings* by name.

Remember that spell in the 1950s when we got *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein*, *I Was a Teenage Vampire*, etc.? Well, witchcraft wasn't big then, so we missed *I Was a Teenage Witch*. But we have it now; *Midnight Offerings* is sort of *Conjure Wife Goes to High School*. Seems that the Big Lady On Campus is that because she has Powers. But when she gets down on a new girl, seems that *she* has powers, too. Duck, everybody!

Seriously, the film's script wasn't all that bad, though not well produced. There were two scenes between Vivian, the nasty lady (Melissa Sue Anderson, a brunette with startlingly light blue eyes) and her witch mother (*Soap*'s Cathryn Damon), who was fully aware of what was going on, that were quite powerful. You might check it out on rerun.

But the mere fact that I can find something good to say about a movie made for TV really makes me wonder — *is* my brain rotting?

The F&SF Competition will appear in the August issue.

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About The Artist

Almost every night we get together for our coffee and conversation. Yet every time I enter the Bash studio I am overwhelmed and amazed. The pure bulk of work this man turns out is staggering. It is hard to believe one man can have so much to say, and say it well; for each piece has a quality of soul. These aren't rush job "renderings" or just pretty pictures, these are PAINTINGS! with depth and volume, life and truth. That is the most important part, I think, the truth. Bash doesn't lie to you. Even his pieces of total fantasy are truth; because Bash paints like he talks, as himself. Bash, a truth-fantasy himself, came to this world on January 14, 1946 (in the guise of a human baby) in Culver City, California. From that point on he grew and watched everything around him like an empty canvas longing for color. Then one day in June, 1968 Bash began to paint, and paint and paint....

Viewing his portraits of famous personalities, it seems that Bash must know them (if perhaps only on an astral plane). Walking into his studio is like strolling into a celebrities' cocktail party; Sophia Loren, Edward G. Robinson, Clark Gable, John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Harry Houdini, and James Dean all share company on the canvas bardo. When I look at his portrait of Einstein reading a book on etiquette, I think, "ya, Bash must have had a talk with Albert," even if it was a conversation you and I couldn't hear. Seeing Hitler standing in his bombed-out backyard with a canvas and brushes seems so ludicrous and "parallel worldly" that I know we could have been spared disaster if only Adolph would have been able to draw people.

Perhaps it is this sense of alter-realism from the brush of Bash that makes his work so popular in Southern California. Some of his collectors are as famous as his subjects, such as; Harlan Ellison (author), Martin Scorsese (film maker), George Lucus (film maker), Johnny Carson (T.V. Personality), Donald Sutherland (actor), and even institutions like NASA (Washington, D.C.), the Universal Grand Hotel (Las Vegas, Neveda), and the Space Byte Corporation.

Starting in January of 1981 Bash will be putting visual attention to Norman Spinrad's infamous "Children of Hamlin" (published by Pequod Press): 24 to 27 black and whites, one for each chapter and the full color cover wrap around, which will be the first time Bash will create a book cover design and concept using a '57 Volkswagon as the canvas. I think Bash is a little dazed after doing the Stephen King cover (a new Underwood-Miller book about Kings work). The cover art for this book focuses on different subjects from his other books (*Salems Lot*, *The Shining* etc.). While completing the last strokes on a character from *Firestarter* the night sky burst into Cadmium orange. Someone put the torch to an apartment building two doors away. Bash and I scrambled up the ladder to the roof of his studio, both of us with hoses going full blast! Just as we got everything watered, it started raining, the "Tropical Raingod" lending us a hand in saving the studio and a life's work.

—WILLIAM WHITTEN

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Graham Petrie writes that he "was born in Malaya, educated in Scotland and at Oxford, and have lived in Canada since 1964. I teach courses on Film, Science Fiction and Dickens at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. I have just published a novel, SEAHORSE and have had fiction in a wide variety of magazines, including 'Herman' in F&SF, August 1973."

Bars: An Aspect of Night Life

BY
GRAHAM PETRIE

Cautious George pulls back the curtain and peers inside. The blare of music is deafening, the room so dark he can scarcely make out anything beyond a swirl of colored lights. Behind them, intermittently bathed in them, a female form gyrates. George blinks, opens his eyes wide, peers once more. Discovers that he is staring straight at the barman, whose surly, bloated face jerks sideways in brusque invitation. George hesitates, glances behind him to find his retreat cut off by another customer, prepared, if necessary, to shoulder him impatiently aside. Edges forward into the room, pauses. Come in, or get out, the barman urges, you people make me sick. George advances to the bar. What's his pleasure? Beer is, just at the moment. The glass is banged on the counter before him, foam slipping down the sides. George takes a sip, swivels round with his left elbow resting on the counter to survey the entertainment.

Which consists of a young woman, wearing only spectacles and a G-string, undulating, more or less in time, to a record. She works her way downstage towards a group of men huddled together, silent, in semi-darkness. She offers them her breasts, thrusts them almost into their faces. The men are motionless. One of them takes a large swallow of beer, licks the foam thoughtfully from his lips, his eyes are fixed on her face and do not waver.

The woman works her way upstage again until, abruptly, the music stops. She shifts from convulsion to smoothness and walks briskly off. The barman picks up a microphone and announces that she was great. Give her a big hand, boys, a big hand for the one and only Rita. Who will be back to entertain them again shortly. There is a

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thin patter of applause. The barman shrugs and puts on another record.

George has become aware of the woman sitting beside him. She is talking to a friend, an endless babble, a flood of words from which he can make out very little, So he said this, and I said that, and if that's the way you feel about it, I said, you can just pack up your things and go. The friend nods encouragingly, Men are bastards, she agrees, all of them. One woman has her back to him, she wears a transparent blouse and, underneath that, it is plain, nothing. She has short dark hair and, if he shifts position slightly, George can see past her to the other woman, a blonde, with cheeks rouged as heavily as a clown's and dark-green eye shadow. He finds her both repellent and exciting. Not the kind of woman you want your son to marry or your daughter to become, but nevertheless the kind of woman that....

Should present no objections to a carefully managed advance. George waits impatiently for her friend to pause, to snatch even a breath in the stream of words that crashes and pounds and dazes him as if he stood too close to the edge of a huge waterfall, Niagara perhaps, hoping to catch the woman's eye, to signal his interest in her, but the speaker is inexhaustible, there was someone else she threw out too, either at the same time as the first one, or earlier, or later, they are all the same, take what they can get, expect you to cook for them and wash their socks, borrow money from you, cheat on you, and when they go half your possessions go with them, her radio this time and her fur coat, sure she got it at the Salvation Army but it was still worth something, they'll take anything that isn't nailed down and sometimes they'll come back with a crowbar to get that too.

The barman invites them to welcome back the one and only Rita. Who is clothed this time, but surely not for long. George finishes his beer and orders another one. The barman keeps him waiting for a moment, while he flicks a switch on and off several times. The stage darkens and brightens, green lights become orange, red turns to blue. Rita has most of her clothes off by now, she stretches out langorously on a bench covered with white fur. She picks up a bottle of pink liquid, some kind of hand cream perhaps, spurts some lazily onto her breasts. She rubs this into her skin with slow circling movements of her hands. Her skin glistens. A man sitting near the stage a short distance away from George groans. He is moved by the spectacle before him and turns his eyes upwards to the ceiling. Rita wriggles about on the bench for a few moments, stands up and walks around the stage. She hooks her thumbs into the front of her G-string, snaps the elastic once or twice. The man who had groaned before, groans again. The record stops, Rita picks up her clothes, leaves. The barman calls for applause for the one

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and only Rita, and the groaning man claps enthusiastically. Rita has blonde, almost white hair and must be thirty-five years old. She wears a wedding ring.

Well, that is all very fine in its way, but it is not what George came here for. He has made up his mind to speak to the woman next to him, brutally interrupting her friend's tirade, but just as he opens his mouth, the woman stands up, still with her back to him, and takes off her blouse. She hands this to her friend, removes her slacks. She walks to the back of the stage and comes through the curtain. The barman asks for a big hand for the incomparable Josephine. George looks round for the friend, now that the babble, of necessity, has ceased, but she has left, has gone to join a young man at the far end of the bar. She is talking to him already, her lips move, she gazes earnestly into his eyes.

George will finish up his drink and go. Back to his hotel room and the late-night movie. He watches Josephine on the stage, her thin, pointed breasts. He puts his empty glass on the bar and at that moment the phone rings. The barman answers. He asks the caller to repeat his question, then places his hand over the mouthpiece. Is there anyone in the bar called George? he asks. There is no response. He repeats the question, shrugs, tells the caller there is no George there. But whoever is at the other end of the line is insistent and the barman must try again. This time he looks squarely at George. Someone wants to speak to him, he announces. If he is indeed George.

In a manner of speaking, he is, but who could know of his presence here? An entrance on pure impulse. But the barman is shaking the receiver in his face and he must reply. George takes the phone. This is George, and who is speaking? The voice is male, uneasily familiar. Does not identify itself. Tells George not to be discouraged so easily. Faint heart never won, and so on. The woman is interested in him, would welcome an approach. That man is nothing to her, a mere acquaintance, from whose company she longs to be withdrawn. Aggressiveness on George's part would be a virtue: the man is timid, easily frightened, and the woman would be flattered. He has nothing to lose and should act immediately. Before Josephine returns.

George wants to know who this is, how he knows him and his name, why he is offering him this advice, but there is merely a chuckle of encouragement and the line goes dead. George stares at the receiver until the barman, passing by, snatches it from him and replaces it on its cradle. How can this be? A strange city, an unknown street, a bar entered at random. All the more reason, perhaps, to trust the speaker who has gained this knowledge. And what does he have to lose? He glances at the woman who, at the same moment, lifts her head. Their eyes meet. She turns away again at once, but this is enough

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for George. He rises and walks round the bar to join her. Hovers near the couple, shifting from foot to foot, waits for a break in the conversation. Seizes his opportunity. Can he buy her a drink? His name is George.

She gapes at him, mouth open, makes no response. George looks around for the barman, is about to order another of the same for the lady, when something grasps his shoulder and whirls him round. A hand planted firmly on his chest shoves him away from the bar. He staggers, flails his arms, crashes against the table where the groaning man sits, overturning it. A beer glass smashes to the floor. The barman is beside him immediately. Grabs his arm, hustles him to the door. Out you go, buddy. George obtains one last glimpse of the interior before he is shot out into the night. The friend is talking to her companion once more, who brushes his hands together before picking up his drink. As if he had never been....

He walks unsteadily along the street. Past the bars, the topless night clubs, the peepshows, the adult movie theaters, the adult bookshops. He will go back to his hotel. He will lock himself in his room and take a drink from the bottle of whiskey he carries with him to all conventions. He will watch the late-night movie. He will go to bed. But George is a man of many moods and slides from gaiety to despair and back again within a street block. He stops to look at the books displayed in a window. At the stills outside a cinema. Once again the glitter of flashing neon excites him, entraps him. Here is another bar, more respectable this time, that announces dancing and live music. He peers through the window. There are plenty of girls around the bar, a band is playing. Hope springs eternal in George's breast, and a man can only try.

He finds a vacant seat between two women and orders a beer. He looks around him. The band is loud, raucous. The singer is a blonde young woman in a see-through blouse, tight pants. Couples are dancing. She yells the last words of the song into the microphone. There is a sudden silence. The couples shuffle back to their seats. Thank you. And now here is something quieter for those of you who wish to be cozy. George takes a drink of beer. The two women to his left appear to be together; at any rate they talk, though not to the extent of the couple in the other bar. But the woman on his right, of indeterminate age, her head turned away from him so that he can glimpse only part of her profile, is obviously alone.

He will ask her for a dance. Not now, for this song is almost over. They will scarcely have taken the floor before they have to stop. But the next one. He drinks his beer, waits. But the next dance is loud and vigorous once more. George is not a good dancer, he prefers to wait until a crowd has gathered, he cannot be the first to take the

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floor. Business is slow this time, however, no one seems to want to dance and, when they do, it is so far into the song that George decides to postpone it all once more.

The song ends in a thunderous blast of sound that rips painfully through George's ears. He is all set to go now, he will take part in the next dance, come what may, has only to make contact with the woman, who obstinately directs her gaze away from him, towards the doorway. Thank you. And now the band is going to take a short rest. And will be back in ten minutes. They must enjoy themselves till then. A waitress switches on the jukebox, but it is not the same. No one will dance to that. What can he do in the interval? If the woman would at least turn and look at him. But he cannot grab her arm and whirl her round.

Meanwhile, here is a man standing beside George. Dressed in what looks like the uniform of a British admiral, but is obviously fake. With a trim gray beard, like the admirals in commercials. Begs George to excuse him and stretches his arm past him to collect his drink. A gin and tonic. With an English accent. He stands beside George for a moment, then, as he moves away, brushes his arm against the shoulder of the woman to George's left. Who whirls round abruptly. He is most terribly sorry and hopes he has spilt nothing on her dress. Such a pretty dress, and such a pretty girl inside it. He hopes she will excuse an old fool for his clumsiness and forgive him. Certainly she will, there is no harm done, and besides he is not so old as that. Old enough to be your father, he says, and his eyes twinkle. But there's life in the old dog yet. Perhaps she would like to set the seal on her forgiveness by joining him and his companions at their table for a drink. And, with a bow, her attractive young friend too, of course. The women inquire of one another quickly, but the decision is soon made. They will be delighted to join them. And he must tell them all about the excitements of his life at sea, the dangers he has faced, the heroism of his encounters with the enemy. A deprecatory shrug. If they insist. But really there is nothing to tell.

Which is probably true enough. His companions are younger than he is, executives like George, attending some conference or another. The admiral makes them rise to their feet to greet their guests. He never ceases to be amazed at the manners of the younger generation. They have their virtues, to be sure, but courtesy is not among them. When he was young, a lady was allowed to do nothing for herself. She was waited on hand and foot. He remembers one time when he and the Prince of Wales....

George turns his head away, can listen to no more. He will finish his drink and leave. He is out of his class here, will merely humiliate himself by competing. They say that the late-night movie is a good one. As he raises

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the glass to his lips, the phone rings. The barman answers. Is there anyone here called George? George is determined not to respond, he will not be fooled this time. But once again he is identified. The phone is set before him. The woman on his right turns to gaze at him a second, without curiosity, then turns away again. There is a burst of laughter from the table where the admiral and his friends sit. The admiral has an arm round the shoulders of each girl and it is only they who are laughing. His companions look gloomy, even sullen.

George says that he needs no more advice, thank you, and his caller will please leave him alone in future. He has no idea what he wants with him, or how he can track his movements both inside and outside these bars, but he is perfectly capable of looking after himself. The voice apologizes, yet cannot be blamed for what happened in the previous incident. The woman *was* interested in George, he can guarantee it, but his appearance was too sudden, his demeanor *too* aggressive. He may not have realized that, but it was the case nonetheless. Now, if he plays his cards correctly this time.... He is not interested, George insists, continuing to listen. The woman on his right, early thirties, divorced, comes to this bar each evening. Would welcome a subtle approach. Flattery. Old-fashioned courtesy. Take a tip from the admiral. The rest is up to George.

The band has begun to assemble onstage once more. Is tuning up. The singer picks up the microphone. And now to get everyone in a romantic mood, a song recorded by.... They try to play softly, but really, with their equipment, it is impossible. Nevertheless, couples flock onto the dance floor, the place is packed with them. Now is George's chance. He leans close to the woman. Tenderly. Would she care to dance? To shake a leg? To have a spin? To go for a whirl? To waltz, to tango, to twist, to rhumba? To trip the light fantastic? The soft music is so loud she cannot have heard him. She pays no attention. He tries again. How about it? Just a quick one? This time she turns. Stares at him. Utterly impassive. Looks through him and then away. Are you quire sure? he mutters, still trying. She adjusts herself on her stool so that he can see only the back of her head. Orders another drink. What is she here for, George muses, if not to dance? And if to dance, why not with him?

But there is no staying here after this. He would not if he was paid. He makes his way to the door, pushing past the admiral's table, jogging him roughly with his elbow as he goes. The man is busy whispering something into the ear of one of the girls and does not notice this. Outside, even the humidity of the summer night seems cool. He stands a moment on the sidewalk, reflecting. Chooses his direction. Back to the hotel.

The streets are lively now. Men

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converse with women in doorways. Lights flash on and off above cafes, night clubs, cinemas. Pamphlets are distributed by men with beards, unshaven men, men in faded jeans and denims, men with cigarettes drooping from the corners of their mouths. George does not want a massage, French lessons, or individual demonstration of leather goods. Nor is he interested in an educational experience involving the strictest discipline. He crumples up the pamphlets and passes on. Men converse with men in doorways. Neon spills into puddles on the sidewalk, shimmers there. Rock music blasts from loudspeakers set above the doorways of shops. A man harangues a small, ever-changing audience on the injustices of life. George pauses a moment, listens, continues on. Cars squeal too rapidly round corners, brakes screech, now and then a fender crumples. Street vendors offer unwholesome food: hot dogs and pretzels in this compartment, ice cream and pop in the other. Beads, metal trinkets, belts, rugs, shawls, are spread out on the sidewalk. Others stop to examine them, even to buy, but George does not. Women converse with men in doorways. The stench of bad food fills the air, from quick-food restaurants and street stalls. Here is a man painting pictures. Your portrait in five minutes. Specimens of his work are propped up against the wall. He likes to paint sensuous black women, with green eyes, posed against a yellow background. And cats. And dogs. And children. In each case the colors are all wrong, but the audience expects this from modern art and is content. George does not want his portrait painted. He is jostled, pushed, elbowed aside where the crowd is thickest. Here, outside a topless nightclub where men peer into the darkened interior, hoping to catch a glimpse of swaying beasts. Outside a movie theater, where extracts from the current attraciton endlessly, monotonously loop. Outside a bookshop where magazines entice. Helga's Hot Weekend. *Doing It the Greek Way*. Four Nights of Lust. Here George recognizes the groaning man, but does not speak to him. He passes on. Women converse with women in doorways, but George passes on.

Till he finds himself in a quieter area. Only a few blocks now from his hotel. And as he passes an empty booth, the phone rings. George pauses. He should not answer it, it cannot be for him. It rings again. Shrill and insistent in the suddenly silent street, echoing in the empty air. It rings once more. George finds himself in the booth, picking up the receiver. It is for him, of course, he has known it all along. His friend from the bar. Who is sorry that things did not work out that time either, but George has only his own lack of self-confidence to blame. He should speak up for himself more, display his qualities and talents, act aggressively if needed. Not this namby-pamby would she care to dance. How-

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ever, he can offer him a final opportunity, a last chance. Just round the corner from here, in a quiet, discreet setting, is a House. Reputed to be one of the best in town. Frequented by politicians, judges, lawyers, doctors, policemen, clergymen, and businessmen of all descriptions. Not cheap, certainly, but George, with his expense account, can for once afford it. He should ring the bell at number seventy-one and say that he is George. And that George sent him. Quite a coincidence the names, but that's the way life is. He can personally guarantee the quality of the experience. Just round the corner, at number seventy-one.

George slams down the receiver. He will not cooperate. He has been humiliated enough this evening. They will slam the door in his face. It will be a respectable institution, a seminary for young ladies, chaste and decorous. Scandalized, they will summon the police and have him arrested. No, he will not fall for it this time. As he turns to leave the booth, the phone rings once more. He will not pick it up. But does. The voice is placatory. He is a friend, purely a friend. And has George's best interests at heart. If George does not want women, let him state what he does want. Fame. Power. Wealth. Promotion. Any of the usual things can be supplied. Does he want to hurt others with impunity, undetected? That can be arranged too. Take revenge on all who have scorned and slighted him? Starting with the women this evening? Does he want to expose the admiral for the fraud he truly is? There are no obligations, no tricks, no payments. Everything done in a spirit of friendship and goodwill.

George is firm. Adamant. He is sorry, but he is not that kind of person. True, the evening has been a disappointment, but he has only himself to blame. This is not his world. His is the world of lonely hotel roms, of late-night movies on TV, of the half bottle of whiskey drunk in solitude. For years he has tried to deny this, but now he must face up to the fact. So, whoever he is, the caller will now leave him alone.

He puts down the receiver. Inhales the night air deeply as he steps once more into the street. Ignores the lures and temptations that beset him in the few yards that separate him from his goal. Thinks once that he hears a phone ringing faintly in the distance, behind him. Like a despairing messenger, calling in the night. He quickens his pace and now is at his hotel.

Collects his key. There are no letters, no messages. As he walks along the corridor, he hears the phone ringing already in his room. He opens the door, walks smartly to the table, lifts up the receiver, thrusts it under the pillow, places the second pillow on top. Turns on the TV. Takes the bottle from the drawer and pours himself a drink. Sinks into a chair to watch the movie. It has been running for ten minutes already, but that is of no signifi-

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cance. Everything will be repeated in due course. Latecomers are sure to be catered for. They always are.

But George cannot settle. He gets up and walks over to the window. Pulls back the drapes. Outside the city glows and shimmers in the summer night. Headlights track endlessly up and down the street. Traffic lights alter in the rippling pattern of waves breaking in succession on the shore. The city is a sea of humanity, he reflects, unoriginally enough, and he is driftwood, flotsam. Neon signs wink enticingly. Rita's Bar. George's Bar. Helga's Bar.

George sighs. He goes over to the bed. Removes the pillows. Places the receiver to his ear. Listens. Hello, are you there? There is no reply, merely the dead buzz of disconnection. He puts the receiver on its cradle, waits for it to ring once more. Nothing happens. Some give up too easily, he reflects, they think that no means no. They have no knowledge of the contrary human heart. He switches off the television, turns out the light, lies down on the bed with his clothes on. Waits patiently for the telephone to ring.

"Isn't it about time, Doctor, that we released the cold and flu viruses for this season?"

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Susan Coon had two novels published by Avon (RAHNE and CASSILEE) and will have two others released in 1981 (THE VIRGIN and CHI-UNE). She lives in California with her husband and two teenage sons and has held a wide variety of jobs, ranging from engineering specialist to professional mother. This is her first story for F&SF.

Memory-Mate

BY
SUSAN COON

He saw the child crying, and cried with him. He did not know tears were a sign of unhappiness or sorrow, or even joy. The tremble in his throat awakened his vocal chords.

The boy stopped crying.

An inch at a time, his dark-haired boy rose from the rock drinking his tears. His eyes grew wide at the sight of the stranger's boots. He started towards the man's shimmering green jumpsuit, then changed his mind.

The man wept openly in the tones that the child recognized as his.

The boy wiped the tears with the back of his dirty arm and jumped to his feet. "You don't hafta make fun of me." His face was scarlet from crying in the sun.

The man lowered his hands. There were no tears, so signs of distress, only smoothly chiseled features honed with an innocence which made the seven-year-old look ancient.

"What do you want? You better leave before my Pa comes. He doesn't like strangers around here." He retreated two steps, looked around for his father, then back to the stranger, head tilted to the side to study him better. "Where'd you come from?"

The stranger followed again, sitting cross-legged with a two-second delay. His mouth opened as though to speak. No sounds came out.

The boy grew fascinated by the giant mirror image in funny clothing. He uncrossed his legs and leaned back on his palms.

Again the stranger mimicked, somber, just as the boy was, never generating an independent action. Only his eyes moved; looking, searching, registering the world upon which they focused.

"Can't you talk?"

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No answer.

"How come yer here?"

The man blinked but did not respond otherwise.

The boy seemed to struggle for several minutes before he spoke again. "My name's Joseph Justin. And this is my spot where I come when I'm ...." His small voice faltered a moment. "When the world is unhappy I come here. Is that why you came? Are you unhappy, too?" Unconsciously, the boy nodded an agreement to his words.

The stranger nodded, analyzing the interplay of tendon, muscle and mechanization.

"I will be your friend if you want me to." Joseph smiled hopefully and the man smiled an equal response.

Joseph called him "Martian" for a couple of years before removing the "a." By the time Joseph was eleven, and Martin four, they shared many secrets. The boy had watched light-ships descend from the stars and other men talk with Martin. Often Martin went into the silent giants, though he did not remember exactly what happened while he was there or the purpose of the conversation he knew took place. When he came out, he felt a little more complete. He looked forward to the visits from the stars. They felt like home.

He and Joseph did not speak of these things, but let them pass into the back of both their memories.

Martin studied with the boy, worked his second-hand assignments from the Town School, and took a few learning sojourns to as far away as Salt Lake City where the libraries opened up the world to him. There was something about the wide streets and the mountains, which contradicted each other in the city.

They both grew. An avid reader, Martin retained everything and coordinated it with phenomonal logic. Applying what he learned was most difficult for him.

He loved the southern Wasatch Range and the secret, rugged high valley where Joseph welcomed him home after each excursion.

As usual, Martin crossed the desert at night. He watched the skies and felt estranged, isolated. The purpose of his existence, the reason for his presence, eluded him regardless of how much he assimilated. The test of time lay ahead. He would know it when it came. That, he had been promised. And he knew that if he did not pass, he would be terminated, never whole, never rejoined to the elusive part of him whose name he did not know.

The familiarity of the mountains, the sheep calling from the valleys, the dry swelter left over from the afternoon welcomed him back.

The cave Martin called home had been changed slightly during this last journey. A mutton pie wrapped in oil cloth sat on the table he had hewn from the living rock. Beside it was a

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note from Joseph.

There were other signs of the boy's visits. Martin liked the idea of Joseph living with him and wished the arrangement were permanent. He abhorred the bruises which appeared regularly on Joseph's thin body. Twice in the past year he had splinted the boy's left arm.

Martin waited for morning and Joseph.

The day became night, then lapsed into a second day of waiting.

Joseph had never been this late.

He finished the mutton pie. By mid afternoon he decided to go down the mountain.

Martin traced the path Joseph would take to get to their meeting place. He noticed little things. The spring rain had birthed a new look to the mountainside with fragile pastels. The signs were several days old. The boy had not been up the trail since bringing the pie. Martin hurried down the mountain, matching the sun's daily death with his arrival into the secluded canyon where the Justin family and hundreds of sheep lived.

The dogs yapped at a lamb straying from the fold's edge. Chastised, she ran to her mother.

Beyond the sea of grey wool brightening with the rising full moon was the ranch house and barn. It was just as Joseph had described.

He skirted the animals and approached the darkened house. The smell of sheep sat heavily in the stillness. The stench of fear was greater.

Martin exercised caution. Now that he was here he was not sure what his next move should be. It was too late to knock on the door.

After weighing the logical probabilities, he moved into the barn and waited for the sun.

It was a long night. He heard someone crying in the house and thought it Joseph. He could not be sure.

The clap of a screen door against an ill-fitting frame jarred him in the morning. The household was awake.

Carefully he left the barn, circled around and headed for the porch.

Joseph's mother stood on the top step and gazed up the dirt road.

"Good morning," Martin said.

There was no fear in the discolored face that turned toward him. "What do you want?" She took a couple steps, picked up the pail and headed for the pump in the front area.

Alarmed, Martin wanted to ask about Joseph, but thought better of it. "Work. I'm looking for work."

"No work here. Sorry." She hung the pail and started to pump. The pain in her shoulders became obvious the first time she lifted the pump handle.

"Let me help." Martin did not wait for a reply. He filled the pail and took it off the hook. "I'll carry it for you."

She led him back to the porch and hesitated before opening the door.

The inside of the three room house had been destroyed. Broken chairs and shattered glass were concentrated on

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the hooked rug covering the center of the floor. She righted a bench at the eating table on her way to the sink. "I'd be much obliged if you would just set the water on the sideboard."

"Are you alone, ma'am?" Seeing her alarm, he continued, "I mean, you don't look well." He set the water down. "I mean, can I get Addie Cooker over here to .... "

"How do you know about Addie?" She hurriedly fixed a pot of coffee and placed it on the stove. "You from these parts?"

"I pass through now and then." He glanced at the closed door. Joseph was an early riser. The sun was well into the sky. "Look, are you sure there isn't anything I can do to earn a cup of coffee or a breakfast?"

"If you would water the stock and turn the horses out," she said, "I'd be glad to share what we have. No one should go hungry in this country. It's too unforgiving."

By the time Martin finished his tasks — plus feeding the chickens, gathering the eggs and milking the almost-dry cow — the aroma of breakfast was stronger than that of the sheep. He washed up at the pump.

There were two plates set on the table. The glass had been picked up and the broken chairs righted and set off to the side. The door to the second bedroom opened. She came out and closed it behind her, meeting his gaze briefly.

"Anything I can do?" he asked, nodding to the room.

"I .... " She looked away and started for the stove. "I don't think so."

"Why not let me try?" He hurried across the main room.

"No! Leave it be." Like a cat, she pounced, grabbed his arm and held.

He touched her hand and felt the fragileness of her bones, the weathered quality of her flesh, and knew her will to be made of iron. "Let me help."

Her hold tightened.

Softly, he asked, "Is he worse than last time?"

She let go and turned away. "You know Joseph?"

Inside the small room Joseph lay on a narrow bed. He tried to sit up when he saw Martin, but could not.

Martin silently checked the boy over, his concern became grave. The volumes of medical texts he had read collated in his mind to justify his worry.

Moments later he had two horses saddled and brought around to the front. Madaline Justin did not protest when he ordered her up. He had already convinced her that even Addie Cooker's talents couldn't save her boy. This time, Joseph's only hope was the hospital down on the desert edge.

Not until Martin expanded his emotional base and experience did he realize that he was living on the equivalent of death row. Whether he was eligible for rehabilitation and parole into a predominately peace-loving

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society was not the question. Answers began to trickle into his conscience. This rehabilitation program he was in was his last hope. The knowledge depressed him. He did not know what his crime had been, nor would he, regardless of the results. But he did understand the concept of rehabilitation.

When he had tried to explain what had been revealed about himself to Joseph in the hospital room, the futility of his situation came into light. The society that created him would not hesitate to annihilate him. In the same context, he could not change the personality he was a part of molding. He was not viable.

Joseph responded by telling Martin that he loved him.

Martin cried.

Snow covered the mountain tops. Joseph had turned twelve in September, Martin five. Joseph's Pa had returned that summer to find Sheriff Taylor waiting for him with a warrant. Madaline sold off half the sheep to pay for Joseph's operation. Doc Ellis didn't charge her a dime, just a promise for a spring lamb.

Joseph climbed into the trail and reached Martin's cave by noon. It was the first time he had made the climb alone since his Pa beat him senseless.

While the beating left scars on Joseph, it also affected Martin. There was something about the violence which touched a quiet part of his mind and stirred it. He could not understand why he did not totally hate Cyrus Justin.

Martin stirred rabbit stew with one hand and held a book with the other.

"Morning," Joseph said, panting a bit.

He was glad to see the boy and sadly noticed that childhood was already fading. The ranch chores were taking their toll.

"Pull up a rock," Martin said, reaching for the boy's pack.

Joseph sat and stared at the fire.

"Anything wrong?"

"Naw. I just won't be able to get up here much. I moved the sheep into the western range and that's pretty far even on horseback. With school and all ...."

"I understand." He turned the book over on his knee, picked up a plate and motioned at Joseph. After receiving a nod, he piled stew on it and offered it to him.

Joseph took it with a smile.

"How's your Ma?"

"Fine."

"Fine. She's always fine." Martin closed the book and set it behind him.

"Okay, she ain't fine. We're doing the best we can."

"I'm going home with you."

"You sure?" Joseph shoved a forkful into his mouth to hide his joy.

Thoughtfully, "I'm sure. I'm not learning what I came to learn here."

"What're you suppose to learn?"

"I don't know." Martin gazed at the snowcapped mountains and felt disquieted.

"Pa gets out of jail next week."

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* * *

Martin moved in with Joseph and Madaline Justin. Cyrus stayed away and did not contest the divorce or the settlement that gave Madaline the ranch, stock and Joseph. He kept the pickup and camper.

The three of them worked hard over the year and a half that followed. Martin changed bedrooms. None of them spoke of marriage.

The next year Madaline bought a used pickup. Martin and Joseph learned how to drive, though both were passengers when they went down the mountains into town.

Martin's adopted family was finally a happy one.

When winter approached, their third year together, Martin went into the mountains with Joseph. They sorted their sheep and led them to fresh, lower pastures.

Dressed in her best clothes, Madaline waited with hot coffee, stew and crumb cake. It was a festive night. They were prepared for long, frozen winter. The loft was full, the roofs repaired, the doors and windows tight. Ten cords of wood were stacked on the lee side of the house. The root cellar bulged, the shelves sagged under the weight of the jars Madaline had put up. And a small pump now spilled fresh water into the sink.

There was laughter in the rebuilt house as Joseph recounted Martin's fancy riding tricks.

Headlights panned the front of the house. An untuned pickup engine backfired and quit.

Martin's smile disappeared. One glance at Madaline and he knew she was afraid the time had come to pay for her happiness.

Joseph ran to his room and came out slipping the second shell into a double-barreled shotgun.

Cyrus Justin stomped up the stairs and used his fist as a battering ram against the wall.

Madaline froze, her hands clasped at her waist.

"Hey, Joseph, open up! It's me. Yer old man."

Martin motioned Joseph aside and opened the door. "What do you want?"

Cyrus was a big man with a red nose characteristic of drinkers. Oil-pasted ends of his shaggy hair hung from under a stained cowboy hat. In his left hand was a crowbar. Stale whisky clung to his clothes.

"Who the hell are you?"

Martin did not answer.

"No matter." Cyrus weaved when he let go of the door frame. "I come fer my boy. Joseph."

"He doesn't want to go with you." Martin felt the warnings and knew the threat in the man's stance was real. Violence rode the air between them.

Cyrus lunged forward. Martin held his ground. "Leave. You're not wanted here, Justin."

"Look, man." He dropped the crowbar and grabbed Martin by the

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shirt front and brought him to his toes. "I come fer my boy. I ain't leaving without him."

The door banged all the way open. Joseph stood in front of the table with the shotgun aimed at his father's head. "I'm not going with you, Pa. I'm staying here."

"You growed some, boy." Cyrus let go of Martin. "Used to be you couldn't lift that gun. Now, you holds it well." He started forward.

"I'll shoot you, Pa." His adolescent voice cracked. His eyes remained steady.

"The hell you will!" He stormed the room in three drunken strides. He was on Joseph before Martin could stop him.

Madaline screamed and ran for the skinning knife on the counter.

"No!" Martin shouted. "This is not the answer!" His purpose came to him. If he took part in the violence and protected those whom he had learned to care for, his counterpart, the man whose engrams he bore, would never wake. This would be a part of the dream. The chance the Guardians had given him for rehabilitation according to their standards, failed. He was an outcast, unfit to enjoy the right to life in his native society.

The match was uneven, the father so much bigger, the son quicker. Light flashed on the skinning blade when Madaline entered the melee.

Martin pulled her away, then began prying Cyrus and Joseph apart. Both held the gun. Possession belonged to the victor.

In an instant Cyrus yanked the shotgun free and clambered to his feet.

Martin, Joseph and Madaline retreated toward the sink, Martin trying to shield them with his body.

"You comin' with me, boy." The double barrels moved in small circles through the air.

"No," Martin insisted, "he is not. Joseph is staying here."

"Look, man, you get outta the way. He's my boy. He's going with me!"

"No. You do not own him. He is his own person and he is staying here." Martin had chosen his course regardless of how the Parole Board judged him. He cared too much for the boy to relinquish him to the bleak future he would face with Cyrus Justin. Conversely, he could not allow the boy to kill his father, nor could he. Killing was wrong. It answered nothing.

"You move outta the way, hear? Or I'll unload this thing into you." Cyrus took several steps, closing the range.

"Then I guess you'll just have to do that." He wished that he had told Joseph and Madaline how deeply he felt about them. Maybe they knew.

"I'll go," the boy said, stepping aside.

"No, you won't." Martin reached back and drew him into the shelter of his body.

Cyrus pulled each trigger. The im-

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pact threw Martin against Joseph and Madaline, carried them across the floor and slammed them into the cupboards.

Cyrus hesitated.

The roar of the shotgun shook the walls.

Cyrus turned and ran, dropping the empty shotgun on the way.

Madaline moaned, but did not regain consciousness.

Joseph barely glanced at her. The only blood smeared on the floor was his from the fight with Cyrus. He pulled the table cloth down and threw it across Martin.

"Do you remember where you found me?" Martin asked.

Joseph nodded, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Take me back." Martin's eyes closed for the last time. He died.

Winter came early. The summer preparations had paid off.

Madaline sat beside the wood stove and watched the snow fall against the lighted window pane. One of Martin's books lay open on her lap. The nights without him were longer than any night should be. The rift which had grown between her and Joseph flourished with silence.

Joseph had taken Martin into the mountains. When he returned to their special place two days later, there was nothing there, not even a scrap of green fabric. When he thought about it, it seemed that he should have been more surprised at discovering Martin's mechanical insides. But the closeness, the emotional bond they had shared negated what his eyes saw. He could not tell his mother she loved something that was not human, not flesh and blood, not of this world. Better she think ill of him for having buried him without her.

He took out his grief by throwing himself into school work and fixing up the barn.

Now, he dished up a plate of casserole and speared a couple of peaches in a ball jar.

The rattling knock on the door shook him. He almost dropped his plate.

Madaline traded concerned looks with him and reached over for the shotgun they kept handy.

Joseph opened the door cautiously at first, then stepped back.

Martin stood in the night, shaking snow from his plaid jacket. "Hello."

Other than Madaline's fingers tightening around the shotgun, she could not move.

"Martin?" Tears filled the young man's eyes.

"In the flesh. May I come in?" There was so much to tell them now that he had been rehabilitated into a man of peace. He hoped Madaline would understand, and thought she might.

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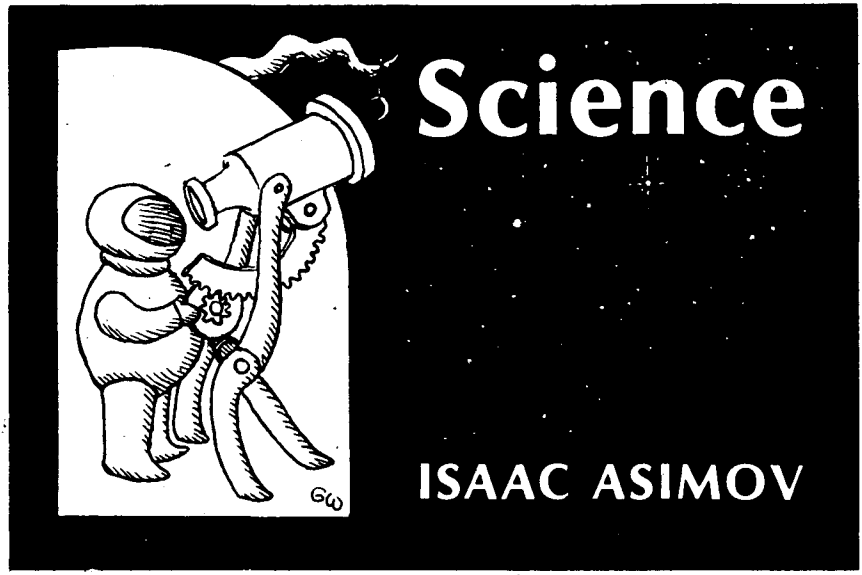

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE RUNAWAY STAR

No one is as dangerous to an aging self-confident lecturer on the platform as a bright twelve-year-old in the audience. In the first place, at twelve years old the brightness of the brain is polished to a high sheen that has not yet been obscured by the light fog of healthy doubt. In the second place, a twelve-year-old monster of brightness is as yet unsubjected to any sense of decency or humanity. All he wants to do is to show off.

I know. I was once a bright twelve-year-old.

I was lecturing once on astronomy when a hand shot up in the audience. The owner of the hand was clearly a twelve-year-old with that sparkling eager look in his eye that I recognized at once. I would not have dreamed of recognizing him, but his was the only hand in a sea of uninterested non-hands and I had to.

He said, in the invariable treble of a bright twelve-year-old, "Sir, which is the second closest star?"

I relaxed. I saw what his nefarious plan was. Everyone and his brother knew the closest star. It was Alpha Centauri. No one, however, knew the second closest, and the monster wanted to expose my ignorance. I smiled

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benignly for I knew I happened to be one of the very few who knew not only the name of the second closest star, but its distance, too.

I said, "It is Barnard's star, young man, and it is about 6 light-years from us."

Whereupon he looked puzzled and said, "That's funny. Then what's the closest star?"

I said, patiently, "That is Alpha Centauri, young man, which is 4.3 light-years from us and is actually a three-star system of —"

"But, sir," said the monster, springing his trap. "I thought that the Sun was the closest star."

At once the audience woke up from its light doze in order to break into piercing cackles of laughter, something I helped along by standing on the platform with laughter of my own. (I have never cured myself of the bad habit of laughing at jokes at my own expense.)

I'm sure you would all be delighted to hear that I sought out the monster afterward and eradicated him from the face of the Earth, but the truth is I did not. He is probably in graduate school now and is approaching the day when he will be on the platform facing a bright twelve-year-old and I hope he gets massacred.

What I will do for revenge is discuss Barnard's star* and begin by asking who the devil Barnard was that he should own a star.

Edward Emerson Barnard was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on December 16, 1857 to an impoverished family. His father was already dead when baby Edward was born. He had time for exactly two months of formal schooling and at the age of almost nine he was working to help support himself and his family. He worked for seventeen years in a portrait studio, which had its points, for it gave him an opportunity to learn the infant art of photography, which was on its way to becoming the mainstay of astronomy. The telescope only aided the eye; the camera, to a large extent, replaced it.

Even while Barnard grew to be an expert photographer, he also developed an interest in astronomy and, while still a young man, discovered (that is, was the first to observe the approach of) several comets. As it turned out, Barnard had (it is believed) the sharpest eyes of any astronomer on

Barnard's star was mentioned in some detail in PROXIMA (F&SF, January 1979), but I want to go into greater detail here and add many more aspects, so those of you who have read the earlier essay will please overlook a little overlapping.

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record. As an example, he once managed to detect a crater on the surface of Mars but did not report it officially because he thought he would be laughed at. Craters were indeed discovered on Mars in 1965 but not by the direct use of lesser human eyes than those of Barnard. They were photographed by the Mars-probe, "Mariner 4," on a close approach to the planet.

Between 1883 and 1887, thanks to Barnard's growing reputation as an astronomer, he was appointed instructor at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. When he left (still without a degree) he joined the staff of the newly-founded Lick Observatory at Mount Hamilton, California and began his true professional career. In 1893, he received a Doctor of Science from Vanderbilt (for his work, not his courses) and in 1895 became professor of astronomy at the University of Chicago. He worked at Yerkes Observatory after it was set up at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, in 1905. He died on February 6, 1923.

In the fall of 1916, Barnard attended a meeting of the American Astronomical Society at Swarthmore College, near Philadelphia, and announced that he had noticed a shift in position of a particular star, a shift that meant it had a larger proper motion than any other star as far as was then known. That star has been called "Barnard's star" ever since. In view of its fast proper motion, it is sometimes called "Barnard's runaway star."

The proper motion of a star is its change of position with respect to the various stars about itself and is usually expressed in seconds of arc per year, which can be abbreviated as "/yr.

There are three factors that can contribute to the proper motion. One is the true relative motion of the star with respect to ourselves, the second is the fraction of that motion which is across our line of sight, and the third is the distance of the star.

As far as the first factor is concerned, all stars move relative to each other, and the relative speeds are, generally speaking, much the same, give or take a moderate amount. The true relative motion of the stars contributes to only a minor degree to any remarkable proper motion.

As for the second factor, most stars travel obliquely with respect to ourselves, neither directly toward us or away from us, nor directly across our line of sight. The angle of motion also contributes to a minor degree only where any remarkable proper motion is concerned.

It is the third factor which is most crucial. For a given speed in a given direction relative to ourselves, the farther away a star, the smaller its apparent drift against the general background of stars, that is, the smaller its proper motion. In fact, for all except the nearest stars, the proper motion is

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too small to measure. Consequently, the mere fact that a star has a proper motion at all tells an astronomer at once that it is a near neighbor to ourselves.

It is a good thing most stars have no measurable proper motion. It would be difficult to isolate individual proper motions otherwise, since the position of a particular star at a particular time can only be measured accurately relative to a neighbor star. If that neighbor star was itself visibly moving, conditions would grow complicated.

As it is, any star near enough to the Solar system to have a proper motion need only have its position measured against the nearest convenient star, and we can almost always rely on that reference star being essentially motionless with respect to other stars and, therefore, a usable reference.

Barnard's star, once its position was measured with reference to nearby stars over a period of time, proved to be moving at the rate of 10.31"/yr. Not only does Barnard's star have a larger proper motion than any other star known at the time of its discovery, but no star with a larger proper motion has been discovered since, to my knowledge.

Consequently, not only can we feel that it is a neighbor-star, but it must be one of the closest there is, if not *the* closest.

Well, it isn't *the* closest. The closest star (always excepting our own Sun, you rotten twelve-year-old kid) is Alpha Centauri, which is 4.27 light-years away. Barnard's star, however, is a good second, for it is only 5.86 light-years away.

To be sure 10.31"/yr is not much of a figure in itself. It is only amazingly large compared to the proper motion of other stars.

For instance, the width of the full Moon, when it happens to be at perigee and is closest to the Earth, is 33.50 minutes of arc (which can be written as 33.50') in width. Since 1' = 60", the Moon is then 2010" in diameter and it takes Barnard's star 195 years to move the full width of the Moon across the sky.

A degree of arc is symbolized ° and 1° = 60', while there are 360° to a full circle. We can conclude that if Barnard's star were to move in the same direction at the same speed indefinitely, it would take 125,700 years to make a complete circuit of the sky.

Why does Barnard's star have a larger proper motion than Alpha Centauri even though Barnard's star is the more distant? Alpha Centauri's proper motion is 3.68"/yr, or only about a third that of Barnard's star.

At the distance of Barnard's star, a proper motion of 10.31"/yr corre-

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sponds to a transverse motion (one across the line of sight) of about 90 kilometers per second (km/sec). The radial motion (directly toward or away from us) of Barnard's star can be determined from the shift of the dark lines of its spectrum as compared with light from a stationary source. The shift in the case of Barnard's star is equivalent of a speed of 108 km/sec. Since the star exhibits a shift in the direction of the violet end of the spectrum, it is approaching us at that speed.

Combining the two speeds, we find that the "space velocity" of Barnard's star is 141 km/sec toward us at an angle of 50° from the line of direct approach. Subjecting Alpha Centauri to the same analysis, its space velocity is 34 km/sec toward us at an angle of 47.5° from the line of direct approach.

Both stars are approaching us obliquely at nearly the same angle so the angle of motion is not a factor. However, Barnard's star's space velocity is 4.14 times that of Alpha Centauri and that, in *this* case, is the crucial factor. The greater distance of Barnard's star reduces the effectiveness of its greater space velocity so that its proper motion is only 2.8 times as great as that of Alpha Centauri.

Barnard's star's space velocity is by no means a record even among those nearer stars where the speed can be determined with some hope of precision. Consider Kapteyn's star, for instance, which is named for the Dutch astronomer Jacobus Cornelius Kapteyn (1851-1922). It has the second largest proper motion known, 8.79"/yr, nearly seven-eighths that of Barnard's star. Kapteyn's star, however, is 13.0 light-years from us, so that it is two and a quarter times as far away from us as Barnard's star is.

Kapteyn's star is receding from us at an angle of only 34.5° from the line of direct recession, so a distinctly smaller fraction of its motion shows up across the line of sight and can be measured as proper motion. The space velocity of Kapteyn's star, however, is 293.5 km/sec, so that it moves twice as fast as Barnard's star does.

If the motions of Alpha Centauri, of Barnard's star, and of Kapteyn's star, were, all three, directly across the line of sight, then the proper motions would be, respectively, 5.44"/yr, 16.15"/yr, and 15.54"/yr. Barnard's star would barely hold its primacy over Kapteyn's star in that case.

Of course, Barnard's star is approaching us, and Kapteyn's star is receding from us so that, as the centuries pass, Barnard's star will increase its proper motion because it will be closer to us and also because as it approaches, a larger and larger fraction of its motion will be across our line of

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sight. Kapteyn's star will, on the other hand, decrease its proper motion for the opposite reasons. (In both cases, I am assuming that the speeds of each with respect to the Solar system will not change in the reasonably short run.)

Barnard's star will make its nearest approach to ourselves 9,800 years from now, at which time it will be 3.85 light-years away. This is only three-fifths its present distance. At that point of closest approach, Barnard's star will be moving directly across our line of sight.

Its proper motion at that time will be 26.4"/yr, or two and a half times what it is now. If it is a runaway star now, what will it be then? It will be moving at a rate that will carry it the width of the full Moon at perigee in a mere 76 years.

Will Barnard's star be the closest star to us at that time?

The only competitor it can possibly have will be Alpha Centauri. Barnard's star will be closer, at its closest, than Alpha Centauri is *now*, but Alpha Centauri is also approaching us at a slant. When Barnard's star is at its closest, 9800 years from now, Alpha Centauri will be about 3.92 light-years from us, a third of a light-year closer than it is now, but it will then be not quite as close as Barnard's star will be.

If my rough calculations are correct, Barnard's star, for a comparatively brief period of time centering about a period ten millennia from now, will be the closest star in the sky (always excepting the Sun, you rotten twelve-year-old kid).

But at that time, Barnard's star will be passing us transversely and will begin to recede and will continue to do so for a very prolonged period. At that time, and for thousands of years afterward, however, Alpha Centauri will continue approaching us at a slant. It will be at its point of closest approach about 38,000 years from now when it will be moving transversely past us at a distance of 2.90 light-years, only two-thirds its present distance. Then it, too, will begin to recede.

An interesting point can be made if we measure these minimum distances in parsecs (which astronomers prefer to light-years). One parsec is equal to 3.26 light-years. That means that Barnard's star will approach from its present distance of 1.81 parsecs to a minimum distance of 1.18 parsecs 9,800 years from now. Alpha Centauri, on the other hand, will approach from its present distance of 1.31 parsecs to a minimum distance of 0.89 parsecs 38,000 years from now.

For a brief period (astronomically speaking) in its path through the Galaxy, Alpha Centauri will be less than a parsec away from the Solar system.

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This is not unusual in the long run. Paul R. Weissman of Jet Propulsion Laboratory estimates that a star passes within a parsec of the Solar system every 200,000 years on the average. This means that 23,000 stars have done so in the 4.6 billion-year-lifetime of the Sun, and perhaps 30,000 more will do so before the Sun ends the present stage of its life-cycle and becomes a red giant.

Still, knowing that lots of stars will do so at some time or other is not the same as knowing that some particular star will do it at some particular time.

So I have a question to ask of any of my Gentle Readers who have better data available to them than I have and who know more about celestial mechanics than I do. We know that Alpha Centauri is on its way to passing within a parsec of ourselves, but will any other star follow it that we know of? Is there a particular star (or stars) in the sky whose space velocity is known and which is aimed at us with such accuracy that it will at some known time pass us within a parsec's distance? If so, which star (or stars) is it and when will it happen? Anything I am told in this respect, I will share with all my Gentle Readers.

The proper motions of stars were first noted in 1718 by the English astronomer Edmund Halley. He noted that Sirius, Procyon and Arcturus were well removed from the positions in which ancient observations had placed them. As if happens, these stars have rather small proper motions: that of Sirius is 1.32"/yr and that of Procyon is 1.25"/yr, but Halley had the advantage of two thousand years of observation.

Once Halley had made his observation, proper motions were searched for in connection with other stars. How did it come about then, that the proper motion of Barnard's star, the fastest moving of them all, was not detected till 1916, two hundred years after the discovery of the phenomenon.

The answer is, of course, that Barnard's star did not have the advantage of thousands of years of observation because it is not a bright star. In fact, it is not visible to the unaided eye, so that it could not have been seen till after the invention of the telescope in 1608. The magnitude of Barnard's star (that is, its apparent brightness on a logarithmic scale) is 9.5, and the dimmest star that can be seen by good eyes on a dark, clear Moonless night may be 6.5 in magnitude. (The smaller the number representing the magnitude, the brighter the object.) This means that Barnard's star is only 1/16 as bright as the dimmest star that can be made out by the unaided eye.

Even when the use of telescopes made it possible to see Barnard's star, it

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was only one of about 130,000 similar faint stars, and there was no reason to observe *it* painstakingly rather than any of the others. That *it*, virtually alone among them, had a huge proper motion could be noted only by accident. Someone, comparing two views (or photographs) of a star-field that happened to contain Barnard's star, would have had to notice that one of the powdering of stars was out of place, look more closely, say "Hey, that's funny" and begin to make other views (or look for other plates of the same starfield taken at still other times).

It happened to be Barnard who did it, and he immortalized his name in consequence.

Barnard's star is a small star, with not more than a fifth the mass of our Sun and therefore only two hundred times as massive as the planet Jupiter. It is not very much more massive than the minimum required to produce enough temperature and pressure at its center to ignite the hydrogen fusion reaction. The fusion that does take place does so at a comparatively low rate so that the surface temperature of Barnard's star is only 2800° C., or just half the surface temperature of the Sun.

At that temperature, Barnard's star gleams with only a dull red light. It belongs to spectral class M5 and is a red dwarf.

If our Sun were replaced by Barnard's star, it would be a red circle in the sky only about a quarter the diameter of the Sun, and in apparent area it would be about a sixteenth that of the Sun.

The total amount of light we would get from Barnard's star would then be 1/2750 that which we now get from the Sun. The warmth we would receive from Barnard's star would be an equally small fraction of that we get from our Sun, so that Earth would be an eternally frozen wasteland if Barnard's star became our luminary. In order to get as little heat from our Sun, Earth would have to revolve about it at a distance of something like 7,800,000,000 kilometers or just a bit farther out than Pluto at its farthest.

If Earth were to remain as far from Barnard's star as it is from the Sun, it would be gripped in a feebler gravitational field and would make its circuit about Barnard's star in something like 850 days or rather over two and a quarter years.

Of course, we needn't look down at Barnard's star with too much contempt. It is not at all the dimmest star there is. For instance, the feeble distant companion of the Alpha Centauri binary star-system, which is known as Proxima Centauri is also a red dwarf, but one that is distinctly dimmer than Barnard's star.

Barnard's star is nearly 7 times as luminous as Proxima Centauri is.

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Still, Barnard's star is approaching us, and its apparent brightness is increasing, which means its magnitude is decreasing. What about the time, 9,800 years from now, when Barnard's star makes its closest approach? How bright will it be then? Will it then be visible to the unaided eye?

At its closest approach, Barnard's star will be 0.9 magnitudes lower than it is now. Its magnitude will be 8.6. It will be two and a quarter times as bright as it is now, but it will still be only 1/7 as bright as necessary to be just made out by unaided eyesight under the most favorable conditions from Earth's surface. Barnard's star would have to be within 1.5 light-years (half a parsec) from Earth to be just barely made out as a dim star to the unaided eye.

Nevertheless, dim or not, Barnard's star's proper motion is spectacular now and will be more spectacular at its closest approach. Imagine astronomers photographing the region of the sky in which Barnard's star is located on every New Years Day. In 76 years, it would move the width of the full Moon while the stars about it would not move any perceptible amount. If the 76 frames were superimposed and flipped past a projection machine at a moderate speed, Barnard's star would be seen creeping across the star-field. It would give people the visible feeling of the motion of that nearby runaway star.

Since we've considered the increasing brightness of Barnard's star, what about the increasing brightness of Alpha Centauri?

Right now, Alpha Centauri has a visual magnitude of -.027 (which, of course, takes into account the combined light of both members of the binary system, since these cannot be separated into two different light-sources by the unaided eye). This is very bright for a star, which is not surprising, since Alpha Centauri is so much closer to us than other stars are.

Yet Alpha Centauri is only the third brightest star in the sky. It is outdone by two other stars that are each further than Alpha Centauri is, but that are so much more luminous intrinsically that even at their greater distances they shine more brightly than Alpha Centauri does.

The second brightest star is Canopus, with a magnitude of -0.72, while the brightest of all is Sirius, with a magnitude of -1.42.

But here again, we must consider that Alpha Centauri is approaching Earth and is slowly increasing in brightness. How bright will it be 38,000 years from now when it reaches its minimum distance of 2.90 light-years from the Solar system.

At that time, it will be shining in the sky with 2.17 times the brilliance it

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now possesses. That means that it will have a magnitude of -1.11 and it will then be brighter than Canopus by a good bit.

Canopus, which is about 195 light-years away, nearly fifty times the distance of Alpha Centauri (and yet so luminous as to outshine Alpha Centauri in our skies today) is receding from us. In a mere 38,000 years, however, it will have receded only about 2.6 light-years, and the increase of its distance by merely 1.3 percent will raise its magnitude from -0.72 to -0.71, an insignificant dimming.

Nevertheless, even at a magnitude of -1.11, Alpha Centauri will remain dimmer than Sirius is today. And it should be remembered that Sirius is also approaching us, albeit very slowly. It has a space velocity of 18 km/sec at an angle of 63° to the line connecting us. It will, after 38,000 years be just about 1 light-year closer than it is today, say 7.63 light-years away instead of 8.63. It will then be shining about 1.28 times as brightly as it is now and its magnitude will be -1.69.

Alpha Centauri will never be the brightest star in the sky, therefore. At its brightest it will be shining only 60 percent as brightly as Sirius will be shining at that time. (At that, it's an improvement, Alpha Centauri shines only a third as brightly as Sirius today.)

After Alpha Centauri's closest approach 38,000 years from now, however, it will begin to recede and fade while Sirius will continue to approach. It will take about 60,000 years for Sirius to skid past us at its point of closest approach when it will be 7.15 light-years away from us. Its magnitude will then be -2.27 and it will be shining just a bit over twice as brightly as it is now.

There will be many stars that will skim past Earth more closely than Sirius will. Alpha Centauri and Barnard's star are two of them, for instance. However, most of the skimmers will be dim stars, since dim stars are far more numerous than bright ones. Not more than one star in a thousand is brighter, intrinsically, than Sirius is, so that it will shine more brightly in the sky when it approaches us as closely as Sirius will, or even somewhat less closely.

So here is a second question for you experts. Is there any star in the sky, of whatever size, that we know is going to pass us in such a way as, at its point of closest approach, to shine with a magnitude of less than -2.27 so as to be brighter than Sirius at *its* closest approach? If this is so, what is the name of the star (or stars) and when will it happen and how bright will the star (or stars) get. Again any information I receive will be shared with the Gentle Readers.

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Even if the answer to the two questions posed in this essay is, in each case, that no star is at present known that will fulfill these conditions, and no such occasion can at present be predicted, that, too, would be interesting.

However, we have not yet finished with Barnard's star. Its most interesting aspect remains to be considered — next month.

"I'm sorry, but there's no way medical science can change you from a canine to a human."

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This, the fourth and longest tale in the series about the last gunslinger and his eerie and gripping pursuit of the man in black, follows "The Oracle and the Mountains," (February 1981). Stephen King's recent books include DANSE MACABRE, nonfiction from Everest House, and CUJO, a new horror novel due in the fall from Viking.

The Slow Mutants

BY

STEPHEN KING

SYNOPSIS: This is the fourth tale of Roland, the last gunslinger, and his quest for the Dark Tower which stands at the root of time. Time is the problem: the dark days have come and the world has moved on. Demons haunt the dark and monsters walk in empty places. The time of light and knowledge have passed.

Against this twilit landscape, the gunslinger pursues the man in black into the desert. Three quarters of the way across its sterile emptiness he comes upon the husk of a way station. Yet there is life here; a puzzling young boy named Jake, who has no understanding of how he came to be there. Under hypnosis, Jake tells the gunslinger a puzzling, disquieting tale ... a tale which ends with Jake's own murder. The boy remembers being pushed in front of an oncoming horseless carriage called a "Cadillac."

Who pushed him?

It was the man in black, Jake says.

The two pilgrims leave the way station and continue on to the foothills ... and the mountains beyond. With Roland goes a jawbone and the memory of the Speaking Demon he has found in the cellar of the way station — a Speaking Demon that has left him this cryptic warning: "Go slow past the Drawers, gunslinger. While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket."

The campfire remnants of the man in black grow fresher. And as Jake sleeps, the gunslinger works laboriously over the figures in his own past: Gabrielle, his mother ... Marten, the sorcerer-physician who may have been the half-brother of the man in black ... Roland, his father ... Cort, his teacher ... Cuthbert, his friend ..., and David, the falcon, "God's gunslinger."

He remembers the execution of a traitor, the cook Hax, by hanging, and "the good man" who has ushered in this new dark age. The good man. Marten. His mother's lover. The half-brother of the man in black ... or is he the man in black himself?

Roland and Jake follow the man in black into the mountains toward what the gunslinger feels may be a killing-

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ground. The man in black has set him snares before on this terrible progress toward the Tower. Roland feels Jake may be another — and Roland has come to love him.

His fears for Jake are nearly justified on their first night in the foothills, when Jake is nearly caught in the toils of a sexual vampire that has been caught for eons in a cage of Druid-stones. This unformed sexual creature is also an oracle, and after taking mescaline, the gunslinger approaches it. In exchange for a sexual encounter that nearly kills him, the oracle provides disquieting information.

"Three is the number of your fate," The oracle tells Roland. "The first is young, dark-haired. He stands on the brink of robbery and murder. A demon has infested him. The name of the demon is HEROIN. The second comes on wheels; her mind is iron, but her heart and eyes are soft. The third comes in chains."

The oracle will tell Roland no more of these three, but speaks grimly of the boy Jake's future: "The boy is your gateway to the man in black. The man in black is your gate to the three. The three are your way to the Tower.... some, gunslinger, live on blood. Even, I understand, the blood of young boys."

The gunslinger asks if there is no way Jake can be saved from the mysterious and terrible fate of being killed a second time. The oracle responds that there is one: if Roland gives up his quest for the Tower, the boy may be saved — and this the gunslinger cannot do.

They climb into the mountains together, and the gunslinger finally confronts the man in black standing on a ledge where a mountain river gushes out of a dark fault in the stone. The man in black, almost within reach, mockingly promises Roland the answers he has sought for twelve years.

Answers, he says, on the other side. Just the two of us.

He disappears into the blackness under the mountains, leaving the gunslinger his final decision: give over, and save the boy he has come to love and his own soul, or push on in search of the man in black and the key to the Tower ... and be damned forever.

The gunslinger begins to climb toward the dark opening from which the river spills, the opening which leads under the mountains ... and Jake, the boy, his sacrifice, follows.

They go into the darkness together.

The gunslinger spoke slowly to Jake in the rising and falling inflections of a dream:

"There were three of us: Cuthbert, Jamie, and I. We weren't supposed to be there, because none of us had passed from the time of children. If we had been caught, Cort would have striped us. But we weren't. I don't think any of the ones that went before us were caught, either. Boys must put on their fathers' pants in private, strut them in front of the mirror, and then sneak them back on their hangers; it was like that. The father pretends he doesn't notice the new way they are hung up, or the traces of boot-polish mustaches still under their noses. Do you see?"

The boy said nothing. He had said nothing since they had relinquished the daylight, and the gunslinger had talked

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hectically, feverishly, to fill his silence. He had not looked back at the light as they passed into the lightlessness beneath the mountains, but the boy had. The gunslinger had read the failing of day in the soft mirror of Jake's cheek: Now faint rose; now milk-glass; now pallid silver; now the last dusk-glow touch of evening; now nothing. The gunslinger had struck a false light and they had gone on.

Now they were camped. No echo from the man in black returned to them. Perhaps he had stopped to rest, too. Or perhaps he floated onward and without running-light, through nighted chambers.

"It was held once a year in the Great Hall," the gunslinger went on. "We called it The Hall of Grandfathers. But it was only the Great Hall."

The sound of dripping water came to their ears. The boy stripped languidly.

"A courting rite." The gunslinger laughed deprecatingly, and the insensate walls made the sound into a loonlike wheeze. "In the old days, the books say, it was the welcoming of spring. But civilization, you know...."

He trailed off, unable to describe the change inherent in that mechanized noun, the death of the romantic and its sterile, carnal revenant, living only a forced respiration of glitter and ceremony; the geometric steps of courtship during the Easter-night dance at the Great Hall which had replaced the mad scribble of love which he could only intuit dimly — hollow grandeur in the place of mean and sweeping passions which might once have erased souls.

"They made something decadent out of it," the gunslinger said. "A play. A game." In his voice was all the unconscious distaste of the ascetic. His face, had there been stronger light to illumine it, would have shown change — harshness and sorrow. But his essential force had not been cut or diluted. The lack of imagination that still remained in that face was remarkable.

"But the Ball," the gunslinger said. "The Ball...."

The boy did not speak.

"There were five crystal chandeliers, and the floor polished, heavy glass with electric lights beneath. It was all light, it was an island of light.

"We had sneaked into one of the old balconies, the ones that were supposed to be unsafe. But we were still boys. We were above everything, and we could look down on it. I don't remember that any of us said anything. We only looked, and we looked for hours.

"There was a great stone table where the gunslingers and their women sat, watching the dancers. A few of the gunslingers danced, but only a few. And they were the young ones. The other ones only sat, and it seemed to me they were half embarrassed in all that light, that civilized light. They were revered ones, the feared ones, the guardians, but they seemed like hostlers in that crowd of cavaliers with

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their soft women....

"There were four circular tables loaded with food, and they turned all the time. The cooks' boys never stopped coming and going from seven until three the next morning. The tables rotated like clocks, and we could smell roast pork, beef, lobster, chickens, baked apples. There were ices and candies. There were great flaming skewers of meat.

"And Marten sat next to my mother and father — I knew them even from so high above — and once she and Marten danced, slowly and revolvingly, and the others cleared the floor for them and clapped when it was over. The gunslingers did not clap, but my father stood slowly and held his hands out to her. And she went, smiling.

"It was a moment of passage, boy. A time such as must be at the Tower itself, when things come together and hold and make power in time. My father had taken control, had been acknowledged and singled out. Marten was the acknowledger; my father was the mover. And his wife my mother, went to him, the connection between them. Betrayer.

"My father was the last lord of light."

The gunslinger looked down at his hands, and they twisted together as if in agony. The boy still said nothing. His face was only thoughtful.

"I remember how they danced," the gunslinger said softly. "My mother and Marten the enchanter. I remember how they danced, revolving slowly together and apart, in the old steps of courtship."

He looked at the boy, smiling. "But it meant nothing, you know. Because power had been passed in some way that none of them knew but all understood, and my mother was locked root and rind to the holder and wielder of that power. Was it not so? She went to him when the dance was over, didn't she? And clasped his hand? Did they applaud? Did the hall ring with it as those pansy-boys and their soft ladies applauded and lauded him? Did it? Did it?"

Bitter water dripped distantly in the darkness. The boy said nothing.

"I remember how they danced," the gunslinger said softly. 'I remember how they danced...." He looked up at the unseeable stone roof and it seemed for a moment that he might scream at it, rail at it, challenge it blindly — those dumb tonnages of insensible granite that bore their tiny lives in its stone intestine.

"What hand could have held the knife that did my father to his death?"

"I'm tired," the boy said wistfully.

The gunslinger lapsed into silence, and the boy laid over and put one hand between his cheek and the stone. The little flame in front of them guttered. The gunslinger rolled a smoke. It seemed he could see the crystal light still, in the sardonic hall of his memory; hear the shout of accolade, empty

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in a husked land that stood even then hopeless against a gray ocean of time. The island of light hurt him bitterly, and he wished he had never held witness to it, or to his father's cuckoldry.

He passed smoke between his mouth and nostrils, looking down at the boy. How we make large circles in earth for ourselves, he thought. How long before the daylight again?

He slept.

After the sound of his breathing had become long and steady and regular, the boy opened his eyes and looked at the gunslinger with an expression that was very much like love. The last light of the fire caught in one pupil for a moment and was drowned there. He went to sleep.

The gunslinger had lost most of his time sense in the desert, which was changeless; he lost the rest of it here in these chambers under the mountains, which were lightless. Neither of them had any means of telling time, and the concept of hours became meaningless. In a sense, they stood outside of time. A day might have been a week, or a week a day. They walked, they slept, they ate thinly. Their only companion was the steady thundering rush of the water, drilled its auger path through the stone. They followed it, drank from its flat, mineral-salted depth. At times the gunslinger thought he saw fugitive drifting lights like corpse-lamps beneath its surface, but supposed they were only projections of his brain, which had not forgotten the light. Still, he cautioned the boy not to put his feet in the water.

The range finder in his head took them on steadily.

The path beside the river (for it was a path; smooth, sunken to a slight concavity) led always upward, toward the river's head. At regular intervals they came to curved stone pylons with sunken ringbolts; perhaps once oxen or stage-horses had tethered there. At each was a steel flagon holding an electric torch, but these were all barren of life and light.

During the third period of rest-before-sleep, the boy wandered away a little. The gunslinger could hear small conversation of rattled pebbles as he moved cautiously.

"Careful," he said. "You can't see where you are."

"I'm crawling. It's ... say!"

"What is it?" The gunslinger half crouched, touching the haft of one gun.

There was a slight pause. The gunslinger strained his eyes uselessly.

"I think it's a railroad," the boy said dubiously.

The gunslinger got up and walked slowly toward the sound of Jake's voice, leading with one foot lightly to test for pitfalls.

"Here." A hand reached out and cat's-pawed the gunslinger's face. The boy was very good in the dark, better than the gunslinger himself. His eyes seemed to dilate until there was no color left in them: the gunslinger saw this

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as he struck a meager light. There was no fuel in this rock womb, and what they had brought with them was going rapidly to ash. At times the urge to strike a light was well-nigh insatiable.

The boy was standing beside a curved rock wall that was lined with parallel metal staves off into the darkness. Each carried black bulbs that might once have been conductors of electricity. And beside and below, set only inches off the stone floor, were tracks of bright metal. What might have run on those tracks at one time? The gunslinger could only imagine black electric bullets, flying through this forever night with affrighted searchlight eyes going before. He knew of no such things and had never heard of them. But there were skeletons in the world, just as there were demons. He had once come upon a hermit who had gained a quasi-religious power over a miserable flock of kine-keepers by possession of an ancient gasoline pump. The hermit crouched beside it, one arm wrapped possessively around it, and preached wild, guttering, sullen sermons. He occasionally placed the still-bright steel nozzle, which was attached to a rotted rubber hose, between his legs. On the pump, in perfectly legible (although rust-clotted) letters, was a legend of unknown meaning: *AMOCO. Lead Free.* Amoco had become the totem of a thunder-god, and they had worshipped Him with the half-mad slaughter of sheep.

Hulks, the gunslinger thought. Only meaningless hulks in sands that once were seas.

And now a railroad.

"We'll follow it," he said.

The boy said nothing.

The gunslinger extinguished the light and they slept. When the gunslinger awoke the boy was up before him, sitting on one of the rails and watching him sightlessly in the dark.

They followed the rails like blindmen, the gunslinger leading, the boy following. They slipped their feet along one rail always, also like blindmen. The steady rush of the river, off to the right was their companion. They did not speak, and this went on for three periods of waking. The gunslinger felt no urge to think coherently, or to plan. His sleep was dreamless.

During the fourth period of waking and walking, they literally stumbled on a handcar.

The gunslinger ran into it chest-high, and the boy, walking on the other side, struck his forehead and went down with a cry.

The gunslinger made a light immediately. "Are you all right?" The words sounded sharp, almost waspish, and he winced at them.

"Yes." The boy was holding his head gingerly. He shook it once to make sure he had told the truth. They turned to look at what they had run into.

It was a flat square of metal that sat mutely on the tracks. There was a see-saw handle in the center of the square.

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The gunslinger had no immediate sense of it, but the boy knew immediately.

"It's a handcar."

"What?"

"Handcar," the boy said impatiently, "like in the old movies. Look."

He pulled himself up and went to the handle. He managed to push it down, but it was necessary to hang all his weight on the handle. He grunted briefly. The handcar moved a foot, with silent timelessness, on the rails.

"It works a little hard," the boy said, as if apologizing for it.

The gunslinger pulled himself up and pushed the handle down. The handcar moved forward obediently, then stopped. He could feel a driveshaft turn beneath his feet. The operation pleased him — it was the first old machine other than the pump at the way station that he had seen in years which still worked — but it disquieted him, too. It would take them to their destination that much quicker. The curse-kiss again, he thought, and knew the man in black had meant them to find this, too.

"Neat, huh?" The boy said, and his voice was full of loathing.

"What are movies?" The gunslinger asked again.

Jake still did not answer and they stood in a black silence, life in a tomb where life had fled. The gunslinger could hear his organs at work inside his body and the boy's respiration. That was all.

"You stand on one side. I stand on the other side," Jake said. "You'll have to push by yourself until it gets rolling good. Then I can help. First you push, then I push. We'll go right along. Get it?"

"I get it," the gunslinger said. His hands were in helpless, despairing fists.

"But you'll have to push by yourself until it gets rolling good," the boy repeated, looking at him.

The gunslinger had a sudden vivid picture of the Great Hall a year after the spring Ball, in the shattered, hulked shards of revolt, civil strife, and invasion. It was followed with the memory of Allie, the woman from Tull with the scar, pushed and pulled by the bullets that were killing her in reflex. It was followed by Jamie's face, blue in death, by Susan's, twisted and weeping. All my old friends, the gunslinger thought, and smiled hideously.

"I'll push," the gunslinger said.

He began to push.

They rolled on through the dark, faster now, no longer having to feel their way. Once the awkwardness of a buried age had been run off the handcar, it went smoothly. The boy tried to do his share, and the gunslinger allowed him small shifts — but mostly he pumped by himself, in large and chest-stretching rises and fallings. The river was their companion, sometimes closer on their right, sometimes further away. Once it took on huge and thunderous hollowness, as if passing

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through a prehistoric cathedral narthex. Once the sound of it disappeared almost altogether.

The speed and the made wind against their faces seemed to take the place of sight and to put them once again in a frame of time and reference. The gunslinger estimated they were making anywhere from ten to fifteen miles an hour, always on a shallow, almost imperceptible uphill grade that wore him out deceptively. When they stopped he slept like the stone itself. Their food was almost gone again. Neither of them worried about it.

For the gunslinger, the tenseness of a coming climax was as imperceivable but as real and as accretive as the fatigue of propelling the handcar. They were close to the end of the beginning. He felt like a performer placed on center stage minutes before the rise of the curtain; settled in position with his first line held in his mind, he heard the unseen audience rattling programs and settling in seats. He lived with a tight, tidy ball of unholy anticipation in his belly and welcomed the exercise that let him sleep.

The boy spoke less and less; but at their stopping place one sleep-period before they were attacked by the Slow Mutants, he asked the gunslinger almost shyly about his coming of age.

The gunslinger had been leaning against the handle, a cigarette from his dwindling supply of tobacco clamped in his mouth. He had been on the verge of his usual unthinking sleep when the boy asked his question.

"Why would you want to know that?" He asked.

The boy's voice was curiously stubborn, as if hiding embarrassment. "I just do." And after a pause, he added: "I always wondered about growing up. It's mostly lies."

"It wasn't growing up," the gunslinger said. "I never grew up all at once. I did it one place and another along the way. I saw a man hung once. that was part of it, though I didn't know it then. I left a girl in a place called King's Town twelve years ago. That was another part. I never knew any of the parts when they happened. Only later I knew that."

He realized with some unease that he was avoiding.

"I suppose the coming of age was part, too," he said, almost grudgingly. "It was formal. Almost stylized; like a dance." He laughed unpleasantly. "Like love.

"Love and dying have been my life."

The boy said nothing.

"It was necessary to prove one's self in battle," the gunslinger began.

Summer, and hot.

It was August, and it had come to the land like a vampire lover, killing the land and the crops of the tenant farmers, turning the fields of the castle-city white and sterile. In the west, some miles distant and near the bor-

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ders that were the end of the civilized world, fighting had already begun. All reports were bad, and all of them palled before the heat that rested over this place of the center. Cattle lolled empty-eyed in the pens of the stockyards. Pigs grunted listlessly, unmindful of knives whetted for the coming fall. People whined about taxes and conscription, as they always have; but there was an emptiness beneath the apathetic passion play of politics. The center had frayed like a rag rug that had been washed and walked on and shaken and hung and dried. The lines and nets of mesh which held the last jewel at the breast of the world were unraveling. Things were not holding together. The earth drew in its breath in the summer of the coming eclipse. People waited for blood to run and fog their empty eyes with unreason.

The boy idled along the upper corridor of this stone place which was home, sensing these things, not understanding. He was also empty and dangerous.

It had been three years since the hanging of the cook who had always been able to find snacks for hungry boys, and he had filled out. Now, dressed only in faded denim pants, fourteen years old, he had already come to the widened chest-span and lengthening legs that would characterize his manhood. He was still unbedded, but two of the younger slatterns of a West-Town merchant had cast eyes on him. He had felt a response and felt it more strongly now. Even in the coolness of the passage, he felt sweat on his body.

Ahead were his mother's apartments and he approached them incuriously, meaning only to pass them and go upward to the roof, where a thin breeze and the pleasure of his hand awaited.

He had passed the door when a voice called him: "You. Boy."

It was Marten, the enchanter. He was dressed with a suspicious, upsetting casualness — black whipcord trousers almost as tight as leotards, and a white shirt open halfway down his chest. His hair was tousled.

The boy looked at him silently.

"Come in, come in! Don't stand in the hall! Your mother wants to speak to you." He was smiling with his mouth, but the lines of his face held a deeper, more sardonic humor. Beneath that there was only coldness.

But his mother did not seem to want to see him. She sat in the low-backed chair by the large window in the central parlor of her apartments, the one which overlooked the hot blank stone of the central courtyard. She was dressed in a loose, informal gown and looked at the boy only once — a quick, glinting rueful smile, like autumn sun on stream water. During the rest of the interview she studied her hands.

He saw her seldom now, and the phantom of cradle songs had almost faded from his brain. But she was a be-

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loved stranger. He felt an amorphous fear, and an uncoalesced hatred for Marten, his father's right-hand man (or was it the other way around?), was born.

And, of course, there had already been some backstreet talk — talk which he honestly thought he hadn't heard.

"Are you well?" She asked him softly, studying her hands. Marten stood beside her, a heavy, disturbing hand near the juncture of her white shoulder and white neck, smiling on them both. His brown eyes were dark to the point of blackness with smiling.

"Yes," he said.

"Your studies go well?"

"I'm trying," he said. They both knew he was not flashingly intelligent like Cuthbert, or even quick, like Jamie. He was a plodder and a bludgeoner.

"And David?" She knew his affection for the hawk.

The boy looked up at Marten, still smiling paternally down on all this. "Past his prime."

His mother seemed to wince; for a moment Marten's face seemed to darken, his grip on her shoulder tighten. Then she looked out into the hot whiteness of the day, and all was as it had been.

It's a charade, he thought. A game. Who is playing with whom?

"You have a scar on your forehead," Marten said, still smiling. "Are you going to be a fighter like your father or are you just slow?"

This time she did wince.

"Both," the boy said. He looked steadily at Marten and smiled painfully. Even in here, it was very hot.

Marten stopped smiling abruptly. "You can to the roof now, boy. I believe you have business there."

But Marten had misunderstood, underestimated. They had been speaking in the low tongue, a parody of informality. But now the boy flashed into High Speech:

"My mother has not yet dismissed me, bondsman!"

Marten's face twisted as if quirtlashed. The boy heard his mother's dreadful, woeful gasp. She spoke his name.

But the painful smile remained intact on the boy's face and he stepped forward. "Will you give me a sign of fealty, bondsman? In the name of my father whom you serve?"

Marten stared at him, rankly unbelieving.

"Go," Marten said gently. "Go and find your hand."

Smiling, the boy went.

As he closed the door and went back the way he came, he heard his mother wail. It was a banshee sound.

Then he heard Marten's laugh.

The boy continued to smile as he went to his test.

Jamie had come from the shopwives, and when he saw the boy crossing the exercise yard, he ran to tell Roland the latest gossips of bloodshed

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and revolt to the west. But he fell aside, the words all unspoken. They had known each other since the time of infancy, and as boys they had dared each other, cuffed each other, and made a thousand explorations of the walls within which they had both been birthed.

The boy strode past him, staring without seeing, grinning his painful grin. He was walking toward Cort's cottage, where the shades were drawn to ward off the savage afternoon heat. Cort napped in the afternoon so that he could enjoy his evening tomcat forays into the mazed and filthy brothels of the lower town to the fullest extent.

Jamie knew in a flash of intuition, knew what was to come, and in his fear and ecstasy he was torn between following Roland and going after the others.

Then his hypnotism was broken and he ran toward the main buildings, screaming. "Cuthbert! Allen! Thomas!" His screams sounded puny and thin in the heat. They had known, all of them, in that invisible way boys have, that the boy would be the first of them to try the line. But this was too soon.

The hideous grin on Roland's face which had galvanized him as no news of wars, revolts, and witchcrafts could have done. This was more than words from a toothless mouth given over fly-specked heads of lettuce.

Roland walked to the cottage of his teacher and kicked the door open. It slammed backward, hit the plain rough plaster of the wall and rebounded.

He had never been here before. The entrance opened on an austere kitchen that was cool and brown. A table. Two straight chairs. Two cabinets. A faded linoleum floor, tracked in black paths from the cooler set in the floor to the counter where knives hung, to the table.

A public man's privacy here. The last faded sobriety of a violent midnight carouser who had loved the boys of three generations roughly, and made some of them into gunslingers.

"Cort!"

He kicked the table, sending it across the room and into the counter. Knives from the wall rack fell in twinkling jackstraws.

There was thick stirring in the other room, a half-sleep clearing of the throat. The boy did not enter, knowing it was sham, knowing that Cort had awakened immediately in the cottage's other room and stood with one glittering eye beside the door, waiting to break the intruder's unwary neck.

"Cort, I want you, bondsman!"

Now he spoke the High Speech, and Cort swung the door open. He was dressed only in thin underwear shorts, a squat man with bow legs, runneled with scars from top to toe, bulging with twists of muscle. There was a round, bulging belly. The boy knew from experience that it was spring steel. The one good eye glared at him

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from the bashed and dented hairless head.

The boy saluted formally. "Teach me no more, bondsman. Today I teach you."

"You are early, puler," he said casually, but he also spoke the High Speech. "Five years early, I should judge. I will ask only once. Will you renege?"

The boy only smiled his hideous, painful smile. For Cort, who had seen the smile on a score of bloodied, scarlet-skied fields of honor and dishonor, it was answer enough — perhaps the only answer he would have believed.

"It's too bad," the teacher said absently. "You have been a most promising pupil — the best in two dozen years, I should say. It will be sad to see you broken and set upon a blind path. But the world has moved on. Bad times are on horseback."

The boy still did not speak (and would have been incapable of any coherent explanation, had it been required), but for the first time the awful smile softened a little.

"Still, there is the line of blood," Cort said somberly, "revolt and witchcraft to the west or no. I am your bondsman, boy. I recognize your command and bow to it now — if never again — with my heart."

And Cort, who had cuffed him, kicked him, bled him, cursed him, made mock of him and called him the very eye of syphilis, bent to one knee and bowed his head.

The boy touched the leathery, vulnerable flesh of his neck with wonder, "Rise, bondsman. In love."

Cort stood slowly, and there might have been pain behind the impassive mask of his reamed features. "This is waste. Renege, boy. I break my own oath. Renege, and wait!"

The boy said nothing.

"Very well." Cort's voice became dry and businesslike. "One hour. And the weapon of your choice."

"You will bring your stick?"

"I always have."

"How many sticks have been taken from you, Cort?" Which was tantamount to asking: How many boys have entered the square yard beyond the Great Hall and returned as gunslinger apprentices?

"No stick will be taken from me today," Cort said slowly. "I regret it. There is only the once, boy. The penalty for overeagerness is the same as the penalty for unworthiness. Can you not wait?"

The boy recalled Marten standing over him, tall as mountains. "No."

"Very well. What weapon do you choose?"

The boy said nothing.

Cort's smile showed a jagged ring of teeth. "Wise enough to begin. In an hour. You realize you will in all probability never see the others, or your father, or this place again?"

"I know what exile means," he said softly.

"Go now."

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The boy went, without looking back.

The cellar of the barn was spuriously cool, dank, smelling of cobwebs and earthwater. It was lit from the ubiquitous sun, but felt none of the day's heat; the boy kept the hawk here and the bird seemed comfortable enough.

David was old, now, and no longer hunted the sky. His feathers had lost the radiant animal brightness of three years ago, but the eyes were still as piercing and motionless as ever. You cannot friend a hawk, they said, unless you are a hawk yourself, alone and only a sojourner in the land, without friends or the need of them. The hawk pays no coinage to morals.

David was an old hawk now. The boy hoped (or was he too unimaginative to hope? Did he only know?) that he himself was a young one.

"Hai," he said softly and extended his arm to the tethered perch.

The hawk stepped onto the boy's arm and stood motionless, unhooded. With his other hand the boy reached into his pocket and fished out a bit of dried jerky. The hawk snapped it deftly from between his fingers and made it disappear.

The boy began to stroke David very carefully. Cort most probably would not have believed it if he had seen it, but Cort did not believe the boy's time had come, either.

"I think you die today," he said, continuing to stroke. "I think you will be made sacrifice, like all those little birds we trained you on. Do you remember? No? It doesn't matter. After today, I am the hawk."

David stood on his arm, silent and unblinking, indifferent to his life or death.

"You are old," the boy said reflectively. "And perhaps not my friend. Even a year ago you would have had my eyes instead of that little string of meat, isn't it so? Cort would laugh. But if we get close enough ... which is it, bird? Age or friendship?"

David did not say.

The boy hooded him and found the jesses, which were looped at the end of David's perch. They left the barn.

The yard behind the Great Hall was not really a yard at all, but only a green corridor whose walls were formed by tangled, thick-grown hedges. It had been used for the rite of coming of age for untold times, long before Cort and his predecessor, who had died of a stab-wound from an overzealous hand in this place. Many boys had left the corridor from the east end, where the teacher always entered, as men. The east end faced the Great Hall and all the civilization and intrigue of the lighted world. Many more had slunk sway, beaten and bloody, from the west end, where the boys always entered, as boys forever. The west end faced the mountains and the hut-dwellers; beyond that, the tangled barbarian forests; and beyond that the desert. The

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boy who became a man progressed from darkness and unlearning to light and responsibility. The boy who was beaten could only retreat, forever and forever. The hallway was as smooth and green as a gaming field. It was exactly fifty yards long.

Each end was usually clogged with tense spectators and relatives, for the ritual was usually forecast with great accuracy — eighteen was the most common age (those who had not made their test by the age of twenty-five usually slipped into obscurity as freeholders, unable to face the brutal all-or-nothing fact of the field and the test). But on this day there were none but Jamie, Cuthbert, Allen, and Thomas. They clustered at the boy's end, gape-mouthed and frankly terrified.

"Your weapon, stupid!" Cuthbert hissed, in agony. "You forgot your weapon!"

"I have it," the boy said distantly. Dimly he wondered if the news of this had reached yet to the central buildings, to his mother — and Marten. His father was on a hunt, not due back for weeks. In this he felt a sense of shame, for he felt that in his father he would have found understanding, if not approval. "Has Cort come?"

"Cort is here." The voice came from the far end of the corridor, and Cort stepped into view, dressed in a short singlet. A heavy leather band encircled his forehead to keep sweat from his eyes. He held an ironwood stick in one hand, sharp on one end, heavily blunted and spatulate on the other. He began the litany which all of them, chosen by the blind blood of their fathers, had known since early childhood, learned against the day when they would, perchance, become men.

"Have you come here for a serious purpose, boy?"

"I have come for a serious purpose, teacher."

"Have you come as an outcast from your father's house?"

"I have so come, teacher." And would remain outcast until he had bested Cort. If Cort bested him, he would remain outcast forever.

"Have you come with your chosen weapon?"

"I have so come, teacher."

"What is your weapon?" This was the teacher's advantage, his chance to adjust his plan of battle to the sling or the spear or the net.

"My weapon is David, teacher."

Cort halted only briefly.

"So then have you at me, boy?"

"I do."

"Be swift, then."

And Cort advanced into the corridor, switching his pike from one hand to the other. The boys sighed flutteringly, like birds, as their compatriot stepped to meet him.

My weapon is David, teacher.

Did Cort remember? Had he fully understood? If so, perhaps it was all lost. It turned on surprise — and on whatever stuff the hawk had left in him. Would he only sit, disinterested,

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on the boy's arm, while Cort struck him brainless with the ironwood? Or seek the high, hot sky?

They drew close together, and the boy loosened the hawk's hood with nerveless fingers. It dropped to the green grass, and the boy halted in his tracks. He saw Cort's eyes drop to the bird and widen with surprise and slow-dawning comprehension.

Now, then.

"At him!" The boy cried and raised his arm.

And David flew like a silent brown bullet, stubby wings pumping once, twice, three times, before crashing into Cort's face, talons and beak searching.

"Hai! Roland!" Cuthbert screamed deliriously.

Cort staggered backwards, off balance. The ironwood staff rose and beat futilely at the air about his head. The hawk was an undulating, blurred bundle of feathers.

The boy arrowed forward, his hand held out in a straight wedge, his elbow locked.

Still, Cort was almost too quick for him. The bird had covered ninety percent of his vision, but the ironwood came up again, spatulate end forward, and Cort cold-bloodly performed the only action that could turn events at that point. He beat his own face three times, biceps flexing mercilessly.

David fell away, broken and twisted. One wing flapped at the ground frantically. His cold, predator's eyes stared fiercely into the teacher's bloody, streaming face. Cort's bad eye now bulged blindly from its socket.

The boy delivered a kick to Cort's temple, connecting solidly. It should have ended it; his leg had been numbed by Cort's only blow, but it still should have ended it. It did not. For a moment Cort's face went slack, and then he lunged, grabbing for the boy's foot.

The boy skipped back and tripped over his own feet. He went down asprawl. He heard, from far away the sound of Jamie's scream.

Cort was up, ready to fall on him and finish it. He had lost his advantage. For a moment they looked at each other, the teacher standing over the pupil, with gouts of blood pouring from the left side of his face, the bad eye now closed except for a thin slit of white. There would be no brothels for Cort this night.

Something ripped jaggedly at the boy's hand. It was the hawk, David, tearing blindly. Both wings were broken. It was incredible that he still lived.

The boy grabbed him like a stone, unmindful of the jabbing, diving beak that was taking the flesh from his wrist in ribbons. As Cort flew at him, all spread-eagled, the boy threw the hawk upward.

"Hai! David! Kill!"

Then Cort blotted out the sun and came down atop of him.

The bird was smashed between them, and the boy felt a calloused thumb probe for the socket of his eye. He turned it, at the same time bringing

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up the slab of his thigh to block Cort's crotch-seeking knee. His own hand flailed against the tree of Cort's neck in three hard chops. It was like hitting ribbed stone.

Then Cort made a thick grunting. His body shuddered. Faintly, the boy saw one hand flailing for the dropped stick, and with a jackknifing lunge, he kicked it out of reach. David had hooked one talon into Cort's right ear. The other battered mercilessly at the teacher's cheek, making it a ruin. Warm blood splattered the boy's face, smelling of sheared copper.

Cort's fist struck the bird once, breaking it's back. Again, and the neck snapped away at a crooked angle. And still the talon clutched. There was no ear now; only a red hole tunneled into the side of Cort's skull. The third blow sent the bird flying, clearing Cort's face.

The boy brought the edge of his hand across the bridge of Cort's nose, breaking the thin bone. Blood sprayed.

Cort's grasping, unseeing hand ripped at the boy's buttocks and Roland rolled away blindly, finding Cort's stick, rising to his knees.

Cort came to his own knees, grinning. His face was curtained with gore. The one seeing eye rolled madly in its socket. The nose was smashed over to a haunted, leaning angle. Both cheeks hung in flaps.

The boy held his stick like a baseball player waiting for the pitch.

Cort double-feinted, then came directly at him.

The boy was ready. The ironwood swung in a flat arc, striking Cort's skull with a dull thudding noise. Cort fell on his side, looking at the boy with a lazy unseeing expression. A tiny trickle of spit came from his mouth.

"Yield or die," the boy said. His mouth was filled with wet cotton.

And Cort smiled. Nearly all consciousness was gone, and he would remain tended in his cottage for a week afterward, wrapped in the blackness of coma, but now he held on with all the strength of his pitiless, shadowless life.

"I yield, gunslinger. I yield smiling."

Cort's clear eye closed.

The gunslinger shook him gently, but with persistence. The others were around him now, their hands trembling to thump his back and hoist him to their shoulders; but they held back, afraid, sensing a new gulf. Yet it was not as strange as it could have been, because there had always been a gulf between this one and the rest.

Cort's eye fluttered open again, weakly.

"The key," the gunslinger said. "My birthright, teacher. I need it."

His birthright was the guns — not the heavy ones of his father, weighted with sandalwood — but guns, all the same. Forbidden to all but a few. The ultimate, the final weapon. In the heavy vault under the barracks where he by ancient law was now required to abide, away from his mother's breast, hung his apprentice weapons, heavy cumbersome things of steel and nickel.

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Yet they had seen his father through his apprenticeship, and his father now ruled — at least in name.

"Is it so fearsome, then?" Cort muttered, as if in his sleep. "So pressing? I feared so. And yet you won."

"The key."

"The hawk ... a fine ploy. A fine weapon. How long did it take you to train the bastard?"

"I trained David. I friended him. The key."

"Under my belt, gunslinger." The eye closed again.

The gunslinger reached under Cort's belt, feeling the heavy press of his belly, the huge muscles there now slack and asleep. The key was on a brass ring. He clutched it in his hand, restraining the mad urge to thrust it up to the sky in a salutation of victory.

He got to his feet and was finally turning to the others when Cort's hand fumbled for his foot. For a moment the gunslinger feared some last attack and tensed, but Cort only looked up at him and beckoned with one crusted finger.

"I'm going to sleep now," Cort whispered calmly. "Perhaps forever, I don't know. I teach you no more, gunslinger. You have surpassed me, and two years younger than your father, who was the youngest. But let me counsel."

"What?" Impatiently.

"Wait."

"Huh?" The word was startled out of him.

"Let the word and the legend go before you. There are those who will carry both." His eyes flicked over the gunslinger's shoulder. "Fools, perchance. Let the word go before you. Let your shadow grow. Let it grow hair on its face. Let it become dark." He smiled grotesquely. "Given time, words may even enchant an enchanter. Do you take my meaning, gunslinger?"

"Yes."

"Will you take my last counsel?"

The gunslinger rocked back on his heels, a hunkered, thinking posture that foreshadowed the man. He looked at the sky. It was deepening, purpling. The heat of the day was failing and thunderheads in the west foretold rain. Lightning tines jabbed the placid flank of the rising foothills miles distant. Beyond that, the mountains. Beyond that, the rising fountains of blood and unreason. He was tired, tired into his bones and beyond.

He looked back at Cort. "I will bury my hawk tonight, teacher. And later go into lower town to inform those in the brothels that will wonder about you."

Cort's lips parted in a pained smile. And then he slept.

The gunslinger got to his feet and turned to the others. "Make a litter and take him to his house. Then bring a nurse. No, two nurses. Okay?"

They still watched him, caught in a bated moment that was not yet able to be broken. They still looked for a corona of fire, or a werewolf change of features.

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"Two nurses," the gunslinger repeated, and then smiled. They smiled.

"You god-damned horse drover!" Cuthbert suddenly yelled, grinning. "You haven't left enough meat for the rest of us to pick off the bone!"

"The world won't move on tomorrow," the gunslinger said, quoting the old adage with a smile. "Allen, you butter-ass. Move your freight."

Allen set about making the litter; Thomas and Jamie went together to the main hall and the infirmary.

The gunslinger and Cuthbert looked at each other. They had always been the closest — or as close as they could be under the particular shades of their characters. There was a speculative, open light in Cuthbert's eyes, and the gunslinger controlled only with great difficulty the need to tell him not to call for the test for a year or even eighteen months, lest he go west. But they had been through a great deal together, and the gunslinger did not feel he could risk it without an expression that might be taken for patronization. I've begun to scheme, he thought, and was a little dismayed. Then he thought of Marten, of his mother, and he smiled a deceiver's smile at his friend.

I am to be the first, he thought, knowing it for the first time, although he had thought of it (in a bemused way) many times before. I am to be first.

"Let's go," he said.

"With pleasure, gunslinger."

They left by the east end of the hedge-bordered corridor; Thomas and Jamie were returning with the nurses already. They looked like ghosts in their heavy white robes, crossed at the breast with red.

"Shall I help you with the hawk?" Cuthbert asked.

"Yes," the gunslinger said.

And later, when darkness had come and the rushing thundershowers with it; while huge, phantom caissons rolled across the sky and lightning washed the crooked streets of the lower town in blue fire; while horses stood at hitching rails with their heads down and their tails drooping, the gunslinger took a woman and lay with her.

It was quick and good. When it was over and they lay side by side without speaking, it began to hail with a brief, rattling ferocity. Downstairs and far away, someone was playing *Hey Jude* ragtime. The gunslinger's mind turned reflectively inward. It was in that hail-splattered silence, just before sleep overtook him, that he first thought that he might also be the last.

The gunslinger did not, of course, tell the boy all of this, but perhaps most of it had come through anyway. He had already realized that this was an extremely perceptive boy, not so different from Cuthbert, or even Jamie.

"You asleep?" the gunslinger asked.

"No."

"Did you understand what I told you?"

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"Understand it?" The boy asked, with cautious scorn. "Understand it? Are you kidding?"

"No." But the gunslinger felt defensive. He had never told anyone about his coming of age before, because he felt ambivalent about it. Of course, the hawk had been a perfectly acceptable weapon, yet it had been a trick, too. And a betrayal. The first of many: *Am I readying to throw this boy at the man in black?*

"I understood it," the boy said. "It was a game, wasn't it? Do grown men always have to play games? Does everything have to be an excuse for another kind of game? Do any men grow up or do they only come of age?"

"You don't know everything," the gunslinger said, trying to hold his slow anger.

"No. But I know what I am to you."

"And what is that?" The gunslinger asked tightly.

"A poker chip."

The gunslinger felt an urge to find a rock and brain the boy. Instead, he held his tongue.

"Go to sleep," he said. "Boys need their sleep."

And in his mind he heard Marten's echo: *Go and find your hand.*

He sat stiffly in the darkness, stunned with horror and terrified (for the first time in his existence; of anything) of the self-loathing that might come.

During the next period of waking, the railway angled closer to the underground river, and they came upon the Slow Mutants.

Jake saw the first one and screamed aloud.

The gunslinger's head, which had been fixed straight forward as he pumped the handcar, jerked to the right. There was a rotten jack-o-lantern greenness below and away from them, circular and pulsating faintly. For the first time he became aware of odor — faint, unpleasant, wet.

The greenness was a face, and the face was abnormal. Above the flattened nose was an insectile node of eyes, looking at them expressionlessly. The gunslinger felt an atavistic crawl in his intestines and privates. He stepped up the rhythm of arms and handcar handle slightly.

The glowing face faded.

"What was it?" the boy asked, crawling. "What—" The words stopped dumb in his throat as they came up upon and passed a group of three faintly glowing forms, standing between the rails and the invisible river, watching them, motionless.

"They're Slow Mutants," the gunslinger said. "I don't think they'll bother us. They're probably just as frightened of us as we are of—"

One of the forms broke free and shambled toward them, glowing and changing. The face was that of a starving idiot. The faint naked body had been transformed into a knotted mess of tentacular limbs with suckers.

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The boy screamed again and crowded against the gunslinger's leg like an affrighted dog.

One of the tentacles pawed across the flat platform of the handcar. It reeked of the wet and the dark and of strangeness. The gunslinger let loose of the handle and drew. He put a bullet through the forehead of the starving idiot face. It fell away, its faint swamp-fire glow fading, an eclipsed moon. The gunflash lay bright and branded on their dark retinas, fading only reluctantly. The smell of expended powder was hot and savage and alien in this buried place.

There were others, more of them. None moved against them overtly, but they were closing in on the tracks, a silent, hideous party of rubberneckers.

"You may have to pump for me," the gunslinger said. "Can you?"

"Yes."

"Then be ready."

The boy stood close to him, his body poised. His eyes took in the Slow Mutants only as they passed, not traversing, not seeing more than they had to. The boy assumed a psychic bulge of terror, as if his very id had somehow sprung out through his pores to form a telepathic shield.

The gunslinger pumped steadily but did not increase his speed. The Slow Mutants could smell their terror, he knew that, but he doubted if terror would be enough for them. He and the boy were, after all, creatures of the light, and whole. How they must hate us, he thought, and wondered if they had hated the man in black in the same way. He thought not, or perhaps he had passed among them and through their pitiful hive colony unknown, only the shadow of a dark wing.

The boy made a noise in his throat and the gunslinger turned his head almost casually. Four of them were charging the handcar in a stumbling way — one of them in the process of finding a handgrip.

The gunslinger let go of the handle and drew again, with the same sleepy casual motion. He shot the lead mutant in the head. The mutant made a sighing, sobbing noise and began to grin. Its hands were limp and fishlike, dead; the fingers clove to one another like the fingers of a glove long immersed in drying mud. One of these corpse-hands found the boy's foot and began to pull.

The boy shrieked aloud in the granite womb.

The gunslinger shot the mutant in the chest. It began to slobber through the grin. Jake was going off the side. The gunslinger caught one of his arms and was almost pulled off balance himself. The thing was amazingly strong. The gunslinger put another bullet in the mutant's head. One eye went out like a candle. Still it pulled. They engaged in a silent tug of war for Jake's jerking, wriggling body. They yanked on him like a wishbone.

The handcar was slowing down. The others began to close in — the

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lame, the halt, the blind. Perhaps they only looked for a Jesus to heal them, to raise them Lazarus-like from the darkness.

It's the end for the boy, the gunslinger thought with perfect coldness. This is the end he meant. Let go and pump or hold on and be buried. The end for the boy.

He gave a tremendous yank on the boy's arm and shot the mutant in the belly. For one frozen moment its grip grew even tighter and Jake began to slide off the edge again. Then the dead mud-hands loosened, and the Slow Mutie fell on its face between the tracks behind the slowing handcar, still grinning.

"I thought you'd leave me," the boy was sobbing. "I thought ... I thought...."

"Hold onto my belt," the gunslinger said. "Hold on just as tight as you can."

The hand worked into his belt and clutched there; the boy was breathing in great convulsive, silent gasps.

The gunslinger began to pump steadily again, and the handcar picked up speed. The Slow Mutants fell back a step and watched them go with faces hardly human (or pathetically so), faces that generated the weak phosphorescence common to those weird deep-sea fishes that live under incredible black pressure, faces that held no anger or hate on their senseless orbs, but only what seemed to be a semiconscious, idiot regret.

"They're thinning," the gunslinger said. The drawn-up muscles of his lower belly and privates relaxed the smallest bit. "They're—"

The Slow Mutants had put rocks across the track. The way was blocked. It had been a quick, poor job, perhaps the work of only a minute to clear, but they were stopped. And someone would have to get down and move them. The boy moaned and shuddered closer to the gunslinger. The gunslinger let go of the handle and the handcar coasted noiselessly to the rocks, where it thumped to rest.

The Slow Mutants began to close in again, almost casually, almost as if they had been passing by, lost in a dream of darkness, and had found someone of whom to ask directions. A street-corner congregation of the damned beneath the ancient rock.

"Are they going to get us?" The boy asked calmly.

"No. Be quiet a second."

He looked at the rocks. The mutants were weak, of course, and had not been able to drag any of the boulders to block their way. Only small rocks. Only enough to stop them, to make someone get down.

"Get down," the gunslinger said. "You'll have to move them. I'll cover you."

"No," the boy whimpered. "Please."

"I can't give you a gun and I can't move the rocks and shoot too. You have to get down."

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Jake's eyes rolled terribly; for a moment his body shuddered in tune with the turnings of his mind, and then he wriggled over the side and began to throw rocks to the right and the left madly, not looking.

The gunslinger drew and waited.

Two of them, lurching rather than walking, went for the boy with arms like dough. The guns did their work, stitching the darkness with red-white lances of light that pushed needles of pain into the gunslinger's eyes. The boy screamed and continued to throw away rocks. Witch-glow leaped and danced. Hard to see, now, that was the worst. Everything had gone to shadows.

One of them, glowing hardly at all, suddenly reached for the boy with rubber boogeyman arms. Eyes that ate up half the mutie's head rolled wetly.

Jake screamed again and turned to struggle.

The gunslinger fired without allowing himself to think, before his spotty vision could betray his hands into a terrible quiver; the two heads were only inches apart. It was the mutie who fell, slitheringly.

Jake threw rocks wildly. The mutants milled just outside the invisible line of trespass, closing a little at a time, now very close. Others had caught up, swelling their number.

"All right," the gunslinger said. "Get on. Quick."

When the boy moved, the mutants came at them. Jake was over the side and scrambling to his feet; the gunslinger was already pumping again, all out. Both guns were holstered now. They must run.

Strange hands slapped the metal plane of the car's surface. The boy was holding his belt with both hands now, his face pressed tightly into the small of the gunslinger's back.

A group of them ran onto the tracks, their faces full of that mindless, casual anticipation. The gunslinger was pumped full of adrenalin; the situation of the boy as potential sacrifice added even more strength to his arms, and the car was flying along the tracks into the darkness. They struck the four or five pitiful hulks full force. They flew like rotten bananas struck from the stem.

On and on, into the soundless, flying, banshee darkness.

After an age, the boy raised his face into the made wind, dreading and yet needing to know. The ghost of gunflashes still lingered on his retinas. There was nothing to see but the darkness and nothing to hear but the rumble of the river.

"They're gone," the boy said, suddenly fearing an end to the tracks in the darkness, and the wounding crash as they jumped the rails and plunged to twisted ruin. He had ridden in cars; once his humorless father had driven at ninety on the New Jersey Turnpike and had been stopped. But he had never ridden like this, with the wind and the blindness and the terrors behind and

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ahead, with the sound of the river like a chuckling voice — the voice of the man in black. The gunslinger's arms were pistons in a lunatic human factory.

"They're gone," the boy said timidly, the words ripped from his mouth by the wind. "You can slow down now. We left them behind."

But the gunslinger did not hear. They careened onward into the strange dark.

They went on three periods of waking and sleeping without incident.

During the fourth period of waking (halfway through? three-quarters? they didn't know — only that they weren't tired enough yet to stop) there was a sharp thump beneath them, the handcar swayed, and their bodies immediately leaned to the right with gravity as the rails took a gradual turn to the left.

There was a light ahead — a glow so faint and alien that it seemed at first to be a totally new element, neither earth, air, fire, or water. It had no color and could only be discerned by the fact that they had regained their hands and faces in a dimension beyond that of touch. Their eyes had become so light-sensitive that they noticed the glow over five miles before they approached it.

"The end," the boy said tightly. "It's the end."

"No." The gunslinger spoke with odd assurance. "It isn't."

And it was not. They reached light but not day.

As they approached the source of the glow, they saw for the first time that the rock wall to the left had fallen away and their tracks had been joined by others which crossed in a complex spiderweb. The light laid them in burnished vectors. On some of them there were dark boxcars, passenger coaches, a stage that had been adapted to rails. They made the gunslinger nervous, like ghost galleons trapped in an underground Sargasso.

The light grew stronger, hurting their eyes a little, but growing slowly enough to allow them to adapt. They came from dark to light like divers coming up from deep fathoms in slow stages.

Ahead, drawing nearer, was a huge hangar stretching up into the dark. Cut into it, showing yellow squares of light, were a series of perhaps twenty-four entranceways, growing from the size of toy windows to a height of twenty feet as they drew closer. They passed inside through one of the middle ways. Written above were a series of characters, in various languages, the gunslinger presumed. He was astounded to find that he could read the last one; it was an ancient root of the High Speech itself and said:

TRACK 10 TO SURFACE AND POINTS WEST

The light inside was brighter; the tracks met and merged through a series of switchings. Here some of the traffic

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lanterns still worked, flashing their eternal series of reds and greens and ambers.

They passed between rising stone piers caked black with the passage of thousands of vehicles, and then they were in some kind of central terminal. The gunslinger let the handcar coast slowly to a stop, and they peered around.

"It's like the subway," the boy said.

"Subway?"

"Never mind."

The boy climbed up and onto the hard cement. They looked at silent, deserted booths where newspapers and books had once been vended; an ancient bootery; a weapon shop (the gunslinger, with a sudden burst of excitement, saw revolvers and rifles; closer inspection showed that their barrels had been filled with lead; he did, however, pick out a bow, which he slung over his back, and a quiver of almost useless, badly weighted arrows); a women's apparel shop. Somewhere a converter was turning the air over and over, as it had for thousands of years — but perhaps not for much longer. It had a grating noise somewhere in the middle of its cycle which served to remind that perpetual motion, even under strictly controlled conditions, is still a fool's dream. The air had a flat, mechanized taste. Their shoes made flat echoes.

The boy cried out: "Hey! Hey...."

The gunslinger turned around and went to him. The boy was standing, transfixed, at the book stall. Inside, sprawled in the far corner, was a mummy. The mummy was wearing a blue uniform with gold piping — a trainman's uniform by the look. There was an ancient, perfectly preserved newspaper on the mummy's lap, which crumbled to dust when the gunslinger attempted to look at it. The mummy's face was like an old, shriveled apple. Cautiously, the gunslinger touched the cheek. There was a small puff of dust, and they looked through the cheek and into the mummy's mouth. A gold tooth twinkled.

"Gas," the gunslinger murmured. "They used to be able to make a gas that would do this."

"They fought wars with it," the boy said darkly.

"Yes."

There were other mummies, not a great many, but a few. They were all wearing blue and gold ornamental uniforms. The gunslinger supposed that the gas had been used when the place was empty of all incoming and outgoing traffic. Perhaps, in some dim day, the station had been a military objective of some long-gone army and cause.

The thought depressed him.

"We had better go on," he said, and started toward Track 10 and the handcar again. But the boy stood rebelliously behind him.

"Not going."

The gunslinger turned back, surprised.

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The boy's face was twisted and trembling. "You won't get what you want until I'm dead. I'll take my chances by myself."

The gunslinger nodded noncommittally, hating himself. "Okay." He turned around and walked across to the stone piers and leaped easily down onto the handcar.

"You made a deal!" The boy screamed after him. "I know you did!"

The gunslinger, not replying, carefully put the bow in front of the T-post rising out of the handcar's floor, out of harm's way.

The boy's fists were clenched, his features drawn in agony.

How easily you bluff this young boy, the gunslinger told himself dryly. Again and again his intuition has led him to this point, and again and again you have led him on by the nose — after all, he has no friends but you.

In a sudden, simple thought (almost a vision) it came to him that all he had to do was give it over, turn around, take the boy with him, make him the center of a new force. The Tower did not have to be obtained in this humiliating, nose-rubbing way. Let it come after the boy had a growth of years, when the two of them could cast the man in black aside like a cheap wind-up toy.

Surely, he thought cynically. Surely.

He knew with sudden coldness that going backward would mean death for both of them — death or worse: entombment with the living dead behind them. Decay of all the faculties. With, perhaps, the guns of his father living long after both of them, kept in rotten splendor as totems not unlike the unforgotten gas pump.

Show some guts, he told himself falsely.

He reached for the handle and began to pump it. The handcar moved away from the stone piers.

The boy screamed: *"Wait!"* And began running on the diagonal, toward where the handcar would emerge toward the darkness ahead. The gunslinger had an impulse to speed up, to leave the boy alone yet at least with an uncertainty.

Instead, he caught him as he leaped. The heart beneath the thin shirt thrummed and fluttered as Jake clung to him. It was like the beat of a chicken's heart.

It was very close now.

The sound of the river had become very loud, filling even their dreams with its steady thunder. The gunslinger, more as a whim than anything else, let the boy pump them ahead while he shot a number of arrows into the dark, tethered by fine white lengths of thread.

The bow was very bad, incredibly preserved but with a terrible pull and aim despite that, and the gunslinger knew that very little would improve it. Even re-stringing would not help the tired wood. The arrows would not fly

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far into the dark, but the last one he sent out came back wet and slick. The gunslinger only shrugged when the boy asked him how far, but privately he didn't think the arrow could have traveled more than a hundred yards from the rotted bow — and lucky to get that.

And still the sound grew louder.

During the third waking period after the station, a spectral radiance began to grow again. They had entered a long tunnel of some weird phosphorescent rock, and the wet walls glittered and twinkled with thousands of minute starbursts. They saw things in a kind of eerie, horror-house surreality.

The brute sound of the river was channeled to them by the confining rock, magnified in its own natural amplifier. Yet the sound remained oddly constant, even as they approached the crossing point the gunslinger was sure lay ahead, because the walls were widening, drawing back. The angle of their ascent became more pronounced.

The tracks arrowed straight ahead in the new light. To the gunslinger they looked like the captive tubes of swamp gas sometimes sold for a pretty at the Feast of Joseph fair-time; to the boy they looked like endless streamers of neon tubing. But in its glow they could both see that the rock that had enclosed them so long ended up ahead in ragged twin peninsulas that pointed toward a gulf of darkness ahead — the chasm over the river.

The tracks continued out and over the unknowable drop, supported by a trestle aeons old. And beyond, what seemed an incredible distance, was a tiny pinprick of light; not phosphorescence or fluorescence, but the hard, true light of day. It was as tiny as a needle-prick in a dark cloth, yet weighted with frightful meaning.

"Stop," the boy said. "Stop for a minute. Please."

Unquestioning, the gunslinger let the handcar coast to a rest. The sound of the river was a steady, booming roar, coming from beneath and ahead. The artificial glow from the wet rock was suddenly hateful. For the first time he felt a claustrophobic hand touch him, and the urge to get out, to get free of this living burial, was strong and nearly undeniable.

"We'll go through," the boy said. "Is that what he wants? For us to drive the handcar out over ... that ... and fall down?"

The gunslinger knew it was not but said: "I don't know what he wants."

"We're close now. Can't we walk?"

They got down and approached the lip of the drop carefully. The stone beneath their feet continued to rise until, with a sudden, angling drop, the floor fell away from the tracks and they continued alone, across blackness.

The gunslinger dropped to his knees and peered down. He could dimly make out a complex, nearly incredible webwork of steel girders and struts, disappearing down toward the roar of the river, all in support of the graceful

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arch of the tracks across the void.

In his mind's eye he could imagine the work of time and water on the steel, in deadly tandem. How much support was left? Little. Hardly any? None? He suddenly saw the face of the mummy again, and the way the flesh, seemingly solid, had crumbled effortlessly to powder at the bare touch of his finger.

"We'll walk," the gunslinger said.

He half expected the boy to balk again, but he preceded the gunslinger calmly out onto the rails, crossing on the welded steel slats calmly, with sure feet. The gunslinger followed him, ready to catch him if Jake should put foot wrong.

They left the handcar behind them and walked precariously out over darkness.

The gunslinger felt a fine slick of sweat cover his skin. The trestle was rotten, very rotten. It thrummed beneath his feet with the heady motion of the river far beneath, swaying a little on unseen guy wires. We're acrobats, he thought. Look, mother, no net. I'm flying. He knelt once and examined the crossties they were walking on. They were caked and pitted with rust (he could feel the reason on his face; fresh air, the friend of corruption: very close to the surface now), and a strong blow of the fist made the metal quiver sickly. Once he heard a warning groan beneath his feet and felt the steel settle preparatory to giving way, but he had already moved on.

The boy, of course, was over a hundred pounds lighter and safe enough, unless the going became progressively worse.

Behind them, the handcar had melted into the general gloom. The stone pier on the left extended out perhaps twenty feet. Further than the one on the right, but this was also left behind and they were alone over the gulf.

At first it seemed that the tiny prick of daylight remained mockingly constant (perhaps drawing away from them at the exact pace they approached it — that would be wonderful magic indeed), but gradually the gunslinger realized that it was widening, becoming more defined. They were still below it, but the tracks were still rising.

The boy gave a surprised grunt and suddenly lurched to the side, arms pinwheeling in slow, wide revolutions. It seemed that he tottered on the brink for a very long time indeed before stepping forward again.

"It almost went on me," he said softly, without emotion. "Step over."

The gunslinger did so. The crosstie the boy had stepped on had given way almost entirely and flopped downward lazily, swinging easily on a disintegrating rivet, like a shutter on a haunted window.

Upward, still upward. It was a nightmare walk and so seemed to go on much longer than it did; the air itself seemed to thicken and become like taffy, and the gunslinger felt as if he might be swimming rather than walk-

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ing. Again and again his mind tried to turn itself to thoughtful, lunatic consideration of the awful space between this trestle and the river below. His brain viewed it in spectacular detail, and how it would be: The scream of twisting metal, the lurch as his body slid off to the side, the grabbing for nonexistent handholds with the fingers, the swift rattle of bootheels on treacherous, rotted steel — and then down, turning over and over, the warm spray in his crotch as his bladder let go, the rush of wind against his face, rippling his hair up in cartoon fright, pulling his eyelids back, the dark water rushing to meet him, faster, outstripping even his own scream—

Metal screamed beneath him and he stepped past it unhurriedly, shifting his weight, not thinking of the drop, or of how far they had come, or of how far was left. Not thinking that the boy was expendable and that the sale of his honor was now, at last, nearly negotiated.

"Three ties out here," the boy said coolly. "I'm going to jump. Here! Here!"

The gunslinger saw him silhouetted for a moment against the daylight, an awkward, hunched spread-eagle. He landed and the whole edifice swayed drunkenly. Metal beneath them protested and something far below fell, first with a crash, then with the sound of deep water.

"Are you over?" The gunslinger asked.

"Yes," the boy said remotely, "but it's very rotten. I don't think it will hold you. Me, but not you. Go back now. Go back now and leave me alone."

His voice was hysterical, cold but hysterical.

The gunslinger stepped over the break. One large step did it. The boy was shuddering helplessly. "Go back. I don't want you to kill me."

"For Christ's sake, walk," the gunslinger said roughly. "It's going to fall down."

The boy walked drunkenly now, his hands held out shudderingly before him, fingers splayed.

They went up.

Yes, it was much rottener now. There were frequent breaks of one, two, even three ties, and the gunslinger expected again and again that they would find the long empty space between rails that would either force them back or make them walk on the rails themselves, balanced giddily over the chasm.

He kept his eyes fixed on the daylight.

The glow had taken on a color — blue — and as it came closer it became softer, paling the radiance of the phosphor as it mixed with it. Fifty yards or a hundred? He could not say.

They walked, and now he looked at his feet, crossing from tie to tie. When he looked again, the glow had grown to a hole, and it was not a light but a way out. They were almost there.

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Thirty yards, yes. Ninety short feet. It could be done. Perhaps they would have the man in black yet. Perhaps, in the bright sunlight the evil flowers in his mind would shrivel and anything would be possible.

The sunlight was blocked out.

He looked up, startled, staring, and saw a silhouette filling the light, eating it up, allowing only chinks of mocking blue around the outline of shoulders, the fork of crotch.

"Hello, boys!"

The man in black's voice echoed to them, amplified in this natural throat of stone, the sarcasm taking on mighty overtones. Blindly, the gunslinger sought the jawbone, but it was gone, lost somewhere, used up.

He laughed above them and the sound crashed around them, reverberating like surf in a filling cave. The boy screamed and tottered, a windmill again, arms gyrating through the scant air.

Metal ripped and sloughed beneath them; the rails canted through a slow and dreamy twisting. The boy plunged, and one hand flew up like a gull in the darkness, up, up, and then he hung over the pit; he dangled there, his dark eyes staring up at the gunslinger in final blind lost knowledge.

"Help me."

Booming, racketing: "Come now, gunglinger. Or catch me never!"

All chips on the table. Every card up but one. The boy dangled, a living Tarot card, the hanged man, the Phoenician sailor, innocent lost and barely above the wave of a stygian sea.

Wait then, wait awhile.

"Do I go?" The voice so loud, he makes it hard to think, the power to cloud men's minds....

Don't make it bad, take a sad song and make it better....

"Help me."

The trestle had begun to twist further, screaming, pulling loose from itself like drawn taffy, giving—

"Then I shall leave you."

"No!"

His legs carried him in a sudden leap through the entropy that held him, above the dangling boy, into a skidding, plunging rush toward the light that offered, the Tower frozen on the retina of his mind's eye in a black frieze, suddenly silence, the silhouette gone, even the beat of his heart gone as the trestle settled further, beginning its final slow dance to the depths, tearing loose, his hand finding the rocky, lighted lip of damnation; and behind him, in the dreadful silence, the boy spoke from too far beneath him.

"Go then. There are other worlds than these."

It tore away from him, the whole weight of it; and as he pulled himself up and through to the light and the breeze and the reality of a new karma *(we all shine on)*, he twisted his head back, for a moment in his agony striving to be Janus — but there was nothing, only plummeting silence, for the boy made no sound.

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Then he was up, pulling his legs through onto the rocky escarpment that looked toward a grassy plain at the descending foot, toward where the man in black stood spread-legged, with arms crossed.

He stood drunkenly, pallid as a ghost, eyes huge and swimming beneath his forehead, buckskin shirt smeared with the white dust of his final, lunging crawl. It came to him that he would always flee murder. It came to him that there would be further degradations of the spirit ahead that might make this one seem infinitesimal, and yet he would still flee it, down corridors and through cities, from bed to bed; he would flee the boy's face and try to bury it in cunts or even in further destruction, only to enter one final room and find it looking at him over a candle flame. He had become the boy; the boy had become his. He was a *wurderlak*, lycanthropus of his own making, and in deep dreams he would become the boy and speak strange tongues.

This is death. Is it? Is it?

He walked slowly, drunkenly down the rocky hill toward where the man in black waited. Here the tracks had been worn away, under the sun of reason, and it was as if they had never been.

The man in black pushed his hood away with the backs of both hands, laughing.

"So!" he cried. "Not an end, but the end of the beginning, eh? You progress, gunslinger! You progress! Oh, how I admire you!"

The gunslinger drew with blinding speed and fired twelve times. The gunflashes dimmed the sun itself, and the pounding of the explosions slammed back from the rock-faced escarpments behind them.

"Now," the man in black said, laughing. "Oh, now. We make great magic together, you and I. You kill me no more than you kill yourself."

He withdrew, walking backwards, facing the gunslinger, grinning. "Come. Come. Come."

The gunslinger followed him in broken boots to the place of counseling.

This ends the fourth section of The Dark Tower — the story of Roland, the last gunslinger, and his search for the Tower that stands at the root of time.

ANSWER TO JUNE ACROSTIC

Quotation: Buzzing softly (the sort of sound an electric watch makes), he stood inert in the center of the precinct station's bullpen, his bright blue-anodized metal a gleaming contrast to the paintless worn floorboards. He stood in the middle of momentary activity,

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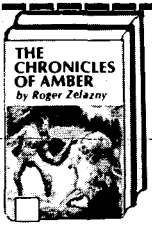

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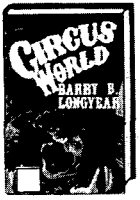

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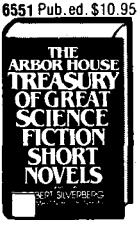

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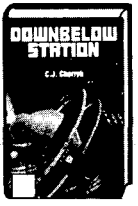

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